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Lou Cameron

The computer had enslaved the town.
Now it was perfecting the art of murder . . .

CYBERNIA

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'Let me get this straight. You people have some sort of mechanical monster here that kills people, and you can't shut it off?'

'Just like in the horror movies,' MacLean answered wryly.

Deputy Romero shook his head and said, 'Hell, why don't you just blow the thing up? I could get some dynamite over at the county seat and – '

'I think that's what we're supposed to do,' MacLean objected.

Romero blinked at MacLean and said, 'Your Frankenstein computer wants to commit suicide?'

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Cybernia

Lou Cameron

CORONET BOOKS
Hodder Fawcett Ltd., London

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First published 1972 by
Fawcett Publications Inc., New York
Coronet edition 1973

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Printed and bound in Great Britain for
Coronet Books, Hodder Fawcett Ltd,
St. Paul's House, Warwick Lane,
London E.C.4.
By Hunt Barnard Printing Ltd.,
Aylesbury, Bucks.

ISBN 0 340 17324 6

CYBERNIA

If you ever want to get completely lost within television range of New York City, I can't think of a better place than the Ramapo Mountains after Labor Day. I wasn't trying that afternoon. But as I rounded the last bend of the two-lane mountain road, I knew I was lost.

The hard top ended in front of a small gray farmhouse clinging to the slope on my right. Beyond, there seemed to be a barely passable dirt track leading into a wall of second-growth forest. A sign had been nailed to a blighted apple tree near the end of the hard top. It read, "Private Road. No Trespassing."

I stopped the car and stared at the crude map a truck driver had drawn for me back at the diner on Route 46. One of us was wrong. I'd followed his written directions to the letter. But here I was in the middle of nowhere with the sun low above the jagged ridges on either side.

A man was walking over to the car from the direction of the house. He was about forty, tall, dark, and lean. I slid over into the suicide seat, rolled down the window on his side, and said, "Hi, I'm looking for Cybernia."

The farmer stared passively for what seemed a full minute before he asked, "Why?"

"I'm supposed to be working there this weekend."

"Doin' what?"

It was none of his damned business. But I was in no po-

sition to argue about his manners. So I smiled and said, "Name's MacLean. Ross MacLean. Ed Morton asked me to drive up and take a look at a computer he's got in the town hall."

"Ed Morton's the city manager, ain't he?"

"That's right. I'm a data-processing technician. I'm supposed to give him a hand with his thinkertinker. If I ever find the place."

"You know Miss Crawford? Linda Crawford?"

"Can't say as I do."

"She's all right, I guess. My cousin Emily works for her over to Cybernia. What's that you got in your hand?"

"It's supposed to be a map," I said, handing him the paper napkin.

Reading aloud, he read, "Take the third turnoff past Peterton and ask Hank Ryker at the Esso Station about that New Town back in the Jackson White country."

He lowered the napkin, glared at me, and growled, "We don't like to be called that, mister."

"Called what, for Pete's sake?"

"Jackson Whites. Who told you to call us Jackson Whites? Them summer people down to Pompton Lake?"

"Guess so," I replied cautiously. "Uh, what *do* you folks hereabouts like to be called?"

"Call us anythin' you like, 'long as it ain't Jackson Whites. I'm sort of used to summer people. But there be places back in the hollows where a man could get hisself hurt callin' another a Jackson White."

"Summer people don't have much sense," I conceded.

Mollified, the farmer said, "That's for damn sure. You say you headed for Cybernia?"

"Thought I was. But I must have taken the wrong turn somewhere."

Pointing with his chin at the dirt road through the woods, the farmer said, "That trace'll take you to Cybernia. It ain't the regular road. But lessen you figure to drive six, seven miles back—"

"What about the no-trespassing sign?" I cut in.

For the first time he smiled, revealing a frightening set

of dentures, as he answered, "I posted that sign my own self. It keeps the damn summer people from this hollow."

Then, without another word he turned on his heel and headed back toward his house.

I threw the car in gear and drove gingerly into the trees. The second growth was mostly hardwood. The road itself was overgrown with fern and orchard grass. I doubted anyone had driven this way recently. Even before Labor Day the Ramapos are not a crowded area. With the summer people gone for the year, the ageless rolling hills were downright spooky.

There were no birds singing in the forest of saplings. I spotted a few chipmunks and once the flash of a frightened deer. But the wooded hills on either side were weirdly silent in the lengthening shadows.

At least, I thought, I couldn't possibly lose my way on this road. Then I swung around another bend and saw the dirt road had come to a dead end.

A twelve-foot wire mesh fence ran across the path in front of me. A metal sign affixed to the mesh said, "Private Property. No Trespassing. Cybernia Municipal Police."

I was getting warm.

I stopped and got out of the car. Walking closer to the fence, I saw there was a foot path running alongside. With any luck there had to be a gate or something somewhere. Ed Morton had told me to stop at the main gate and call in. But there didn't seem to be a gate. Nor was there anything like a telephone in sight. Cybernia might be a planned community, but it sure as hell didn't go out of its way to make a visitor feel at home!

I noticed I was approaching an overgrown stone wall and wondered idly what it was doing there before I remembered this had been farming country back before the Civil War.

The wall seemed to surround an abandoned country churchyard, many tombstones tumbled by frost and all of them overgrown with lichen. I made out a couple of names like Van Tassel and DeWitte, with dates like 1748-

1836 or 1763-1847. People had lived a long time around here once. But it had been a long time ago!

A newer monument near the wall read, "Here I lie because I am dead. Who I was, or what I did, is none of your business."

"Up yours, Jack!" I chuckled, heading back to the car. This time a closer inspection revealed what seemed to be a movable panel of fence across the road. I put a hand on the fence, looking for any sort of hasp or handle, and suddenly a metallic voice blared out at me from the trees.

I nearly jumped out of my skin as the hidden PA system screamed, "ATTENTION! ATTENTION! ATTENTION! YOU ARE TRESPASSING ON PROPERTY OWNED BY THE CYBERNIA CORPORATION! DO NOT ATTEMPT TO CLIMB THE FENCE! YOU MAY BE ELECTROCUTED BY HIGH VOLTAGE!"

I muttered "Jesus!" as the metallic voice echoed among the trees.

A pleasant male voice answered "Yes?" Then it said, "What do you want?"

I had to think about that.

Barring a Second Coming, I assumed a human had taken over from the recorded warning and alarm system. I faced the gate, feeling somewhat foolish, and yelled, "I'm Ross MacLean. Here on business with Ed Morton."

"We've been expecting you, Mr. MacLean," said the invisible speaker as, with a click, the section of fence barring the road started sliding out of the way like a Japanese screen. I turned to climb back in the car as the voice said, "This is an emergency fire road, Mr. MacLean. But if you follow it to the hardtop and turn right, an escort will be waiting to show you the way to Town Hall."

The voice lied. A police car met me less than a mile inside the gate. I was still deep in the woods.

The police cruiser was parked with its tail lights to me. A uniformed guard, wearing a pleasant smile and packing a twelve-gauge shotgun, waved me to a halt and came over to ask for my driver's license. I asked, "Was I speeding?" as I handed him my wallet. He didn't laugh.

"We only follow orders, Mr. MacLean," he murmured,

handing me back my wallet, and adding, "Just follow me, please."

Then he got back in his cruiser. But he didn't start it for a moment. Not until another cop, or guard, who'd been covering me from the trees, lowered the muzzle of his own scatter gun and climbed in beside the driver.

"What," I muttered aloud, "are they building here?"

Ed Morton had said something about an experimental electronics laboratory and a data-processing plant having relocated in the town. But Cybernia was supposed to be one of those planned residential communities like Revson or Columbia. Many of its residents, according to Morton, commuted to New York via the freeway or the old railroad running down the Ramapo Valley. Either way, we were only a few miles from the city. What was with the Oak Ridge maximum security bit? Were they doing work for Uncle?

"Negative on Uncle," I muttered. "Those are private fuzz, not military guards. Somebody's acting a little paranoid in Cybernia."

The police cruiser ahead passed through a planted shelter belt of fifteen-year-old red pine, and beyond, I spotted what looked like a large lake. Then the cruiser swung left on a paved road, and I followed. Not many people would have noticed the electric-eye installation checking us out as we left the dirt fire road. But electronics are my job, and the GE photoelectric alarm system was one I was familiar with.

I started spotting houses, sort of, on either side. I say sort of because each house was set back in its own little shelter belt of evergreen. When they'd laid Cybernia out someone had gotten a buy on cedar, hemlock, and pine. The homes weren't really all that far apart. But each was set in such a way that it gave a feeling of privacy. You couldn't see how big a plot any particular house stood on. You couldn't really see much of anything from the road. The residents of Cybernia could run around their backyards naked as jaybirds for all it mattered. I wondered how many did.

The houses themselves came as a not unpleasant sur-

prise. I'd thought from Ed Morton's description that Cybernia's architecture would run to Frank Lloyd Wrong crackerbox moderne. But despite everything he'd told me about the all-electric heating, internal garbage disposal, and so on, the homes in this part of Cybernia were cozy colonial in design. Most were gray or white with massive chimneys of locally quarried Ramapo rock. The foundation plantings were low-maintenance evergreen stuff. There were a few specimen trees that might drop their leaves in a month or so. But I doubted there'd be enough litter to worry about, and according to Morton, the roadways and walks cleared themselves of snow, thanks to heating elements buried in the concrete. I wondered what sort of an electric bill that added up to. Then I remembered Morton telling me Cybernia had its own municipal power plant. Yeah, given your own source of juice, an all-electric town would work.

The police cruiser slowed down near a driveway, and I saw Ed Morton waving at me. As I pulled over and stopped, the cruiser picked up speed and vanished around the next curve. Thanks to the way things were laid out, things vanished a lot in Cybernia.

Morton got in beside me and said, "Jesus, I thought you'd never get here. What took you so long?"

"Got lost," I replied. "Everyone I asked kept sending me to Sterling Forest. That's the only New Town anyone around here seems to have heard about."

"Shit," muttered Morton. "Sterling Forest is just another dormitory suburb. Levittown with class. My place is up there at the top of the rise."

I threw the car in gear and started up the drive toward a gray saltbox with white trim, half-hidden in a grove of hemlock. I noticed Morton's big blue Toronado parked by a side entrance and wondered idly why he'd sent the fuzz instead of meeting me himself. I parked behind the Toronado and, as we were getting out, mentioned my experience with his spooky fire-road gate.

"Let's go in through the kitchen," Morton muttered. Then he did a take and added, "You say that fence back there is *electrified?*"

"No, the fence did," I replied. "Didn't you know about it, Ed?"

"Not until you told me," he said, opening the side door for me. He led the way through an ultramodern, all-electric kitchen and a spacious dining room. Then when we reached the living room, he waved me to a leather chair near the baronial fireplace and said, "I'll fix us a couple, and we can talk. Bourbon and branch water?"

"Scotch, if you've got it," I said. Then I had to go and ask, "Where's Cynthia? Out shopping or something?"

Ed Morton didn't answer until he'd walked over to the bar near the dining room entrance. Then, with his back to me he muttered, "Cindy and I were divorced this spring, Ross. I thought you knew."

I hadn't. If I had, I might not have come. Ed Morton had met me through his wife Cynthia. She and I had gone to Columbia together, and though I hasten to add it was platonic, we'd been close friends. Morton was eight or ten years older than either of us, and actually I didn't know him that well. From what little I'd seen in the past, I didn't think I liked him very much.

I managed something noncommittal as he mixed our drinks and rejoined me near the fireplace. Handing me my Scotch and water, Morton glanced at his watch and said, "Damn, I wish you'd gotten here a little earlier, Ross. How much time can you give us, anyway?"

"Well, I've got this weekend, and if it's as knotty a problem as you say it is, I can always sneak a few more days. I've got some vacation time accumulated and. . . . What *is* the problem with your thinkertinker, anyway?"

For a long moment Ed Morton didn't answer. When he did, he said soberly, "I think it's after me."

So how do you answer a thing like that?

I stared at the city manager over the rim of my glass as I digested his words. Ed Morton didn't *look* crazy. He was one of those soft pink men who, as they get older, begin to resemble oversized Kewpie dolls. Ed wasn't that old yet. But the jowls and paunch were starting to show, and the hair line was a little too high for his soft, boyish face. At

the moment he looked like he was trying very hard to keep from chewing his nails.

"I suppose that sounds crazy to you, Ross?" he sighed.

"Lots of people feel uneasy around computers," I said. "I've had a few hot flashes when one of the damned things seemed to be talking back to me. But it's an anthropomorphic illusion. Computers don't really think, you know."

"So why do they call them mechanical brains if they don't think?"

"Maybe because we don't have a word for just what it is they *do* do. A computer's much more than an adding machine. But much less than what we call a mind. We can call what it does data processing or cybernetics or computing. But those are just words. You can't really explain cybernetics in English, Ed."

"Yeah? So what language would you suggest?"

"How about FORTRAN?" I smiled. "Or maybe FORGO or COBAL? Does your system work with binary or hexadecimal math?"

"Jesus, I don't know what you're talking about!"

"That makes two of us. What makes you think your system is out to get you?"

"It does things behind my back," he said, frowning. "And lately it's even taken to countermanding my orders. I mean, I *am* supposed to be running this damned town, you know!"

"What have you got here in Cybernia, a city council plus a contract for municipal administration?"

"Yeah. Most efficient way to run a small town, with or without a damned mechanical brain in the town hall," said Morton, getting to his feet. "Come over here by the window, Ross. You can see it from here?"

I got up and walked over, saying, "See what? Town Hall or your sinister data-processing and automated control system?"

"It's in the basement." Morton sighed, pointing down into the valley below. Morton had quite a view from his front window. The civic center and shopping area of the planned community were directly in front of us, with the lake I'd spotted earlier just beyond. I noticed street lights

were going on as the sun set, and the winking of house lights from the other side of the valley. I asked, "All of that's Cybernia Corporation property?"

"Whole valley," answered Morton. "The corporation was formed about 1950. Took them five or six years to finish the planning and buy up the last of the land they needed. Some of those dumb Jackson Whites held out for more money than the land was worth."

"You call that dumb?"

"Okay. Stubborn. I suppose some of these hill folk have brains. But they sure as hell don't like to use them. Anyway, everything you see out there is part of Cybernia. All but that big house on the far ridge."

"Who lives up there? More Jackson Whites?"

"Bradshaw Spinner."

"Not *the* Bradshaw Spinner, the scientist?"

"Yeah, he's one of the founders of Cybernia. The original group was a team of whirling geniuses led by old Spinner himself. They planned the town, the architecture, even that damned thing down in the basement of Town Hall."

I stared for a moment at the building he'd indicated near the lake. It was a neoclassical building that looked like it had been whipped up by Thomas Jefferson with a little help from Walt Disney or maybe Norman Rockwell in a whimsical mood. It looked just like you'd expect a town hall to look like on the cover of the old *Saturday Evening Post*.

Ed said, "That's where the thing's brain is. Most of it, anyway. Apparently the system's sort of grown over the years, like Topsy. It's got these sort of, well, tendrils running all through the town."

I smiled indulgently and asked, "What have you got down there, Ed, the usual IBM 360 M 75 data-processing system tied in with banks of feedback mechanism?"

"Beats the shit out of me. I told you how it's grown!"

"Come on, Ed, machines don't reproduce like rabbits. If someone's been adding components to your basic system, you'd have a record of it, wouldn't you?"

"Sure," he laughed bitterly, adding, "The records are on punched cards in the office of the municipal comptrol-

ler. You want a copy of a contract or purchase order, you ask the . . . the thing to give you a typed readout."

"And it doesn't?"

"Oh, it spouts out all sorts of gobbledygook. On several occasions we've been fed purchase orders from defunct and nonexistent firms. On other occasions it's given us financial statements that can only be checked out by consulting the Cybernia Savings and Loan Association's own computerized records. Do I have to draw you a picture?"

"You don't think you can trust the statements from your own bank?"

"I don't *know,* dammit! You see, the goddam system in Town Hall is tied in with the one in the bank!"

I whistled silently as I considered the antitrust ramifications on that one. Then I asked, "How did all this slip by you, Ed?"

The city manager shrugged and said, "It seemed like a good idea when it was suggested a few years ago. Needless to say, nobody can remember who suggested it. But the realty, mortgage holding, and corporation maintenance bookkeeping were so tied in that it just seemed efficient to automate all the routine transactions. As of now the property owners send their monthly payments to the bank, and the bank's computer system credits partial payments to their mortgage equity, skims off the insurance premium, and credits that to the insurance company's account, and so on down the line. There's a nominal municipal tax, which the computer deducts and credits to the Cybernia Corporation's maintenance fund, and— But never mind. As you see, it's a lot of routine paper work. I guess we were only too happy to let the computers take the load off our gray matter."

I nodded, more familiar than he imagined with the mix ups that can result from leaning too heavily on automation. Then I said, "Meanwhile, there's been a turnover in personnel, and nobody's quite sure, anymore, just what goes where and who said it should."

"That's not even half the problem!" insisted Ed Morton. "I guess we were a little too pleased at the way the automation was working for us, Ross. I guess we started

giving away powers we shouldn't have. But dammit, if you can't trust a damned adding machine, what *can* you trust?"

"What else did you automate?" I asked.

"Everything that could be. And a few things we didn't know we were automating, apparently. Before we knew it, we had the damned system controlling our bank accounts, power grid, and such routine chores as turning on the street lights and lawn sprinklers or taking care of snow removal. Then we allowed it to grow its own complete security system. We thought it was only growing burglar alarms. But—"

"Hey, back up!" I cut in. "I thought we'd established the fact that machines don't grow."

"Okay, it ordered a few wires connected here and there," Morton said. "Our maintenance crews obeyed the work orders they received without question. It took me quite a while before I knew unauthorized work orders were going out. By then the work had been done. I'd been having some, well, personal problems. So I guess I was asleep at the switch part of the time. But you see, the town was running so smoothly—"

"Wait a minute," I insisted. "You're saying your human work crews have been receiving computerized output ordering them to make additions to feedback loops and install new equipment without your knowledge?"

"Well, of course that's what I'm saying, dammit! Would I have asked you to drive up here if I was still in *control* of the situation, Ross?"

I stared thoughtfully down at the dark hulk of Town Hall a moment before I asked, "Don't work orders and purchase requisitions have to be signed, Ed? I mean, signed by a human hand?"

"Not anymore," Morton replied. "A while back it was suggested that things could be speeded up if the automated mailing systems were supplied with presigned blank forms and checks. And for God's sake, don't ask me who suggested it! The other members of the City Council and I have passed that buck back and forth until we're sick of talking about it! Suffice to say, by the time we saw the

danger, it was too late. The computer system has hundreds of authorized signatures locked away in its tin guts and seems to take a perverse delight in the way it uses them. You know what it did to me a month or so ago? It *fired* me! That's what it did! And guess whose signature was on my pink slip?"

"Yours?"

"Of course. Who else could fire a public official of Cybernia but the city manager?"

I laughed despite the look on his face and said, "Obviously you haven't taken your pink slip too seriously, Ed."

"The hell I haven't! You know the reason the damned machine gave for terminating me with two weeks' pay in lieu of notice? It told me very politely I was no longer needed since my former duties had been taken over by automation!"

"How did your fellow members of the corporation take this? I mean, of course, the human members."

"They seemed to think it was pretty funny," said Morton bitterly. "I checked with the legal department naturally, and there's no possible way to make a dumb thing like that wash in a court of law. But, dammit, the machinery thinks I've been fired. My pay checks have stopped coming, and I've received a shutoff notice from the computerized electric billing system!"

"Can't you explain to the electric company?"

"Shit, Ross, I run the electric company! Cybernia owns its own power complex. When they planned the community, it was agreed that the massive amounts of power an all-electric development like this would use justified the expense of building our own plant. That lake furnishes hydroelectric power during high water, and we've a stand-by steam generator that uses bottled propane and methane gas from our sewerage disposal plant down the valley."

"Needless to say, It's completely automated?"

"Controlled by that monster in Town Hall. We have human maintenance crews who clean and inspect from time to time. But the power is produced and metered without human intervention. All billing is automated, and

checks are transferred to the bank electronically. If you don't pay, it also shuts off your power via remote control switches controlled from God know's where!"

"Okay," I suggested. "So why don't you *pay* your electric bill?"

"For Christ's sake, how?"

"How? Well, how do you usually do it? Can't you send in a check or something until we iron out the bugs? Surely you can't be that broke, Ed!"

"I've a little over twelve thousand in my checking account," said Ed Morton a trifle smugly. Then he said, "It's not that simple, Ross. You see, the city manager's position includes this house, rent free, with all utilities paid by the community."

"Sort of a fringe benefit," I said. Then as his words sank in, I grinned at him incredulously and said, "You mean the power company computer won't accept your payments because it's programmed to furnish heat and lights to this house for nothing as long as it's occupied by . . . Wait a minute, Ed, that won't scan!"

"What do you mean, it won't scan. It's doing it, dammit!"

"There's a hole in the logic," I insisted. "As I see the programming, the billing system should have been input to ignore this particular house while feeding it the usual amount of current. Hell, it's too simple to be *programmed*. A jump wire bypassing your meter should have been installed at the time your rent- and utilities-free house was connected to the grid. I could do it myself with a jack knife and a screw driver."

"You really think so?" asked Morton, waving an arm in the direction of the power house near the end of the lake. He added, "What do you think I have working for me, aside from that overgrown adding machine in Town Hall—a bunch of idiots?"

"You had one of your maintenance electricians by-pass the meter?"

"Of course I did. But you know what happened then? My lights went out. Then I got a printed notice telling me my electricity was being shut down until the service crew

could removed unauthorized and possibly dangerous nonstandard wiring from my house!"

He looked at his calendar watch and added, "So now I've only got two days before my electricity gets shut off for good!"

I chewed my lower lip for a time as I thought his words over. I had a hazy idea how the overgrown computer system he'd leaned upon too heavily could have been programmed to zap him the way it had. But unless we had a practical joker on our hands, I couldn't for the life of me figure out why it had been programmed so oddly. In my business you soon learn that computer error is, ninety-nine times out of a hundred, a human error compounded by the unthinking logic of the computer. No human being is dumb enough to think a family on welfare should receive a check for fifty thousand dollars. Or that a family pet should be issued a credit card. But human beings are dumb enough and careless enough to push the wrong button.

Since the computer gives you the right answers to the wrong questions, the results can be rather weird. But this one had me stumped. Try as I might, I couldn't figure an input pattern that could result in this sort of an impasse, no matter who'd pushed what button!

I asked Morton if the system had been playing any other nasty tricks on him, aside from telling him to get lost. The city manager said, "I'm not the only one who's been fired. The goddam thing's gone ape. Couple of our best men got pink slips and left before I knew what had happened. Then the other day, a guy wandered into my office saying he was the new city manager. Had a hell of a time convincing him the job offer he'd received in the mail was a computer error. Our legal department says he hasn't a leg to stand on. But naturally, he's suing us for breach of contract. Can't really say I blame him!"

I said, "He may have a better case than you think, Ed. There's a bill in Congress right now about so-called computer error. Seems a few lawmakers in Foggy Bottom are beginning to wonder about some of the short-changing that's been going on under a new name. Computer error's

become a catch phrase for all sorts of skullduggery lately. Cheat a shopper with a butcher's scale, and you haven't a chance if you call it a mechanical failure beyond human control. But wipe out someone's credit rating or clean out his bank account through computer error, and everyone seems to take it as a visitation from God."

"Well, I guess most judges feel a computer's too complicated a machine to hold the average person responsible for understanding."

"Try that with an automobile some time," I suggested dryly. "Not one driver in a hundred knows how his automatic transmission works. But let him run over a kid sometime and see how far he gets pleading automotive error!"

"He'd go to jail," said Ed Morton. "But the automobile wouldn't! Machines are immune from the law, Ross! If that . . . that *thing* down there were to haul off and kill someone—"

"Come on!" I cut in. "You talk as if your thinkertinker had a conscious self-awareness."

"How do you know it hasn't?" asked Ed Morton bleakly.

Cautiously I replied, "The idea's been played with, Ed. IBM worked it out a few years ago, looking far to the future, of course. They set out to estimate the sheer bulk of a computer system complex enough to reach the lower orders of animal intelligence. Not human intelligence, mind you. But, say, the IQ of a bright mouse. You know how monstrously big a computer would have to be to duplicate the few billion living cells of a rodent's brain? They gave up when they worked their way up to a logic circuit and memory bank the size of the Empire State Building! Nobody's about to build a system that big, of course. But if they did, the thing would be just possibly aware of its own existence. So, you see, the idea of a computer having an actual ego, let alone being out to get anyone—"

"How'd they figure all this out?" Morton cut in with a cunning look in his watery gray eyes.

I frowned and said, "I told you. They worked it out at IBM."

"Ahah! But they worked it out with *computers*, didn't they?"

"Of course, the math alone would have taken them years to do on paper and . . . Hmmm, I see what you mean."

"The computers at IBM could have lied," Ed Morton finished.

I said, "That's pretty wild, Ed."

"Well, this thing I have hiring and firing behind my own back is pretty wild, too. I mean, how'd you like it if your goddam office machines started talking back to you!"

"I'd better take a look," I said. "What have you got down there, anyway? Is it the usual basic IBM 360 hardware?"

"Beats the shit out of me. I'll have Linda Crawford show you through the layout in the morning."

"The morning?" I said, glancing at my watch. "It's still early, Ed, and I've only got a couple of days. Why don't I just look it over this evening?"

"You can't," said Ed Morton uncomfortably.

"Why not?" I insisted.

Morton licked his lips and took a deep breath before he replied, "The, ah, computer won't let you in at night."

"Oh, automated locks or something?"

"Yeah, it says it needs the nights to . . . Jesus, I don't know *what* it does at night. But the programming room closes at five. There's a taped warning. Then the doors lock, and that's that."

"Don't you have a key that'll override the time locks?"

"Linda may have. But, ah, I wouldn't advise going in there after dark, Ross. You, ah, see you're not the first EDP man I asked to check the, ah, thing out. You remember Mike Long, used to be with Honeywell?"

"I've met him," I answered. "What did Mike say was wrong with your thinkertinker?"

"He, ah, didn't get to say. Mike was working on the circuits at quitting time, and when the computer told him to leave with the others, he went over to the input keyboard and wrote, 'Go to hell.' "

"It's tempting sometimes," I said. "Naturally he didn't get a sensible answer?"

"It killed him," said Ed Morton bleakly.

"It *what?*"

"Killed him. The computer killed Mike Long. Oh, the coroner's report said 'Accidental electrocution while working with a high-voltage mechanism.' But all bullshit aside, Ross, aren't you EDPs all trained electricians?"

"We're supposed to be," I said. "How'd it happen to Long?"

"We don't know. Linda Crawford tried to trace the circuit for a source of high voltage. But she couldn't find a thing. Mike Long just went over, sassed the computer on tape, and next thing anyone knew, blooey!"

"How many people saw it happen?"

"Nobody saw it happen. Linda and the girls working for her left the programming room at the regular quitting time. Mike stayed to do what he called his homework. He was found dead the next morning."

"But you said he was killed right after he typed 'Go to hell' on the input keyboard."

"Well, he was lying there, and the readout tapes told us what he'd done. Linda says there's no way to pick up a charge through the keys. But just the same, Mike Long was dead."

"Any metal tools jammed between the panels?"

"Negative. Long's tool chest was across the room, and the computer was in perfect working order the next morning. Or at least, it worked. I don't think anyone can say the way it's been working is all that perfect!"

I thought for a moment before I said, "I'd like to talk to this Linda Crawford as soon as possible, Ed. She have a number?"

"Sure. Lives in an apartment over the supermarket. Doubt she'll be in at this hour, though. Old Bradshaw Spinner's giving a party up at his place on top of the ridge. I'm not up to it. But I think Linda and most of the others will be there later on. Meanwhile, I'd better see about making up the guest room for you, old buddy."

Ed Morton was hardly a buddy, old or otherwise. But I could see the guy was in a sweat, and no matter what had gone sour between him and Cindy, I was beginning to feel sorry for him. More to soothe him than for any other reason, I said, "I'd still like to have Linda Crawford brief me on your thinkertinker. Meanwhile, I guess we're safe until morning, huh?"

"You maybe," he sighed. "I'm not so sure about yours truly. That . . . that thing down there locks itself in at night. But it never sleeps. I know you think I'm out of my gourd. But I'm scared, Ross! Did I tell you what Mike Long looked like when we found him?"

"Never mind," I muttered dryly. "I've seen a few guys after they've been electrocuted."

"Ed's crazy, of course," Linda Crawford was saying for perhaps the third or fourth time since I'd started talking to her. We were seated at a table under an awning just off the shopping mall near the civic center. The table belonged to what seemed to be a French restaurant run by American Indians. The waitress who took our orders was dressed like Mimi the upstairs maid. But her face belonged on Dolores Del Rio's kid sister.

The downtown part of Cybernia was pleasant in an artsy-craftsy way. The mall was lined with shops still open

at this hour, and the people strolling by seemed relaxed and moderately prosperous. Linda Crawford was as well groomed but at the moment a little uptight.

The Cybernia Corporation's input supervisor had turned out to be an attractive brunette of about thirty, give or take a few worry lines around her wide-set hazel eyes. She was wearing a pants suit of gray velvet, and from what I could see of her trim figure, Linda kept herself in pretty good shape.

As our waitress was leaving the table, I fished a pack of cigarettes from my jacket and asked casually, "You have a Jackson White named Emily working for you, Miss Crawford?"

"Emily Drukker?" she said. "Where in the world did you meet Emily?"

"I didn't," I answered. "Stopped this afternoon for directions and this Jackson White asked if I knew you. He said you were all right. Whatever that means."

Linda shot a glance at our retreating waitress and murmured, "I wish you wouldn't call them that, Mr. MacLean. They don't like it."

"So I've been told," I said, offering her a cigarette. "I don't like to be called Mr. MacLean, either. Name's Ross. You call me Ross, and I'll call your spooky hill folk anything they want to be called. I take it that waitress is one of them?"

"Of course," Linda replied, refusing the cigarette with a little shake of her head as she explained, "Most of the residents here in Cybernia are upper-income New Yorkers or people who make their money in New York. We've had to recruit hired help from the surrounding Elder Folk."

"Is that what you call them—Elder Folk?"

"That's what some of them call themselves. Others say they're New Jersey Dutch. But, of course, the white New Jersey Dutch take a dim view of this and call them things like Ramp and Jackson Whites."

"Sounds a little hostile."

"It is. Back in the thirties and forties, when this part of the Ramapos was being reexplored, men were actually

murdered for asking who lived in the next hollow. It's a lot different these days. But even with industry moving back in, the Elder Folk are still a little paranoid."

The waitress was coming back with our drinks. So to change the subject, I asked whether the data-processing system Ed Morton said was out to get him had been installed by IBM or Honeywell.

"It was installed by a man named Gordon," she said. "Gregory Gordon was his full name. He was before my time. But according to Dr. Spinner, he was a whirling genius. You know, of course that IBM and Honeywell components are incompatible?"

"So does the New York State Racing Commission," I smiled.

Linda Crawford didn't smile back as she said, "Well, Gordon put together the most complicated computer I've ever seen, made up from IBM, Honeywell, and, ah, other parts."

"Other?"

"Mail order," she said. "With some military surplus stuff that I think came from a Norden bomb sight. Poor Mike Long insisted the system shouldn't work at all. But as you see, it does."

"You think there's anything to Ed's idea the thinkertinker killed Long for telling it to go to hell?"

"Of course not," she said, shuddering. "It was just some sort of freak accident. It had to be an accident. Mike was all alone in there when whatever happened, ah . . . happened."

"Regular locked-room mystery, huh?"

"That's what the county coroner said. He's Emily Drukker's uncle, by the way. Most of the Elder Folk seem to be related. Anyway, Coroner Drukker insisted on a rather thorough investigation before he was willing to list the death as computer error."

"Computer error, for God's sake?"

"I know it sounds a little silly. But what else was it, unless you buy Ed's idea that the computer killed Mike Long on purpose!"

The waitress finished serving us and turned away a see-

ond time as I nodded after her and wryly asked Linda, "You don't know if she's related to the coroner, do you?"

"Probably," Linda answered. "The Elder Folk are pretty inbred. Not that the stories you've heard about them having six fingers and running to congenital idiocy are true. As a matter of fact, most of them are quite bright. Ford has a bunch of them working over in Mahwah, and I've broken in a few as input operators. Sometimes their English leaves a bit to be desired, but you'd be surprised how quickly they pick up FORTRAN."

"Hybrid vigor maybe," I said. "What are they, anyway? Some sort of white-Afro-Amerindian breed? That waitress looks like she could be part black, along with a good shot of Iroquois."

"She probably is ," said Linda. "Get two of them together and they insist on three versions of Ramapo mountain history. Actually I don't think anyone knows what really happened back before the WPA opened these mountains up in the thirties and forties. Before that there's just a big [illegible]."

"Seems I heard something about British Army deserters running off with Indian women during the Revolutionary War."

"Then why do they have Dutch names?" objected the girl.

I shrugged and offered, "Okay. So Dutch settlers from the Hudson Valley moved up here in these hills, intermarried with Indians and maybe runaway slaves and—"

"They don't like that one," she cut in dryly. "They don't like the story about a man named Jackson who owned white indentured servants a long time ago, either. As a matter of fact, I've never met one of these people named Jackson. Nor do I buy the bit about them being descended from Jacks and Whites, whatever Jacks were at the time."

"Okay. What do you think they are?"

"Human beings," she answered simply. "These hills were even more impoverished than Appalachia until quite recently. Back around the time of the Revolutionary War, iron was discovered in some of the hollows. There's still

what's left of a fairly big mine over near Ringwood. But as time passed by, the mines petered out, the soil was exhausted, and those few people who stayed on were left in clannish poverty for a hundred years or so. Some of them would seem to have been Hudson Valley Dutch. Others were probably black mine workers, and of course, the Indians were always here. Maybe a few other people came from time to time. But more people left than stayed until, after a while, these hills and the people in them got lost from time. They hunted and fished and feuded and bred, and after a lot of years had passed, Roosevelt was president, and the CCC and WPA opened the Ramapos to the outside world again. Of course, the sociologists went nuts when they found these dark, unknown people living just outside New York who apparently were unaware there'd been a war since the Revolution. I say apparently because when you get to know them, these hill people have a sense of humor. God knows how many legends they've made up just to bug the summer people!"

"They don't sound so spooky, the way you tell it," I laughed.

"Oh, they can be spooky," Linda Crawford said. "A man was killed over in the Wanaque watershed just this spring by what witnesses said was a Jackson White."

"Any particular reason? Or was the victim just a summer people?"

"He was from Newark. Period. Who killed him, or why they killed him, is anybody's guess. People seldom die out in the hollows unless there's a reason. But you see, nobody ever tells an outsider what the reason was!"

"Ed Morton said some of them gave the corporation a hard time about moving out, when they bought out this valley."

"The Elder Folk don't like to be ordered off their land," she said. "But I thought we were talking about Ed's crazy idea that the computer's out to get him."

"We are," I answered. "Only you and I both know enough about EDP to know a computer can only do what it's programmed to do."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that unless Ed's completely wigged out—and don't think I'm not considering that—his problem's not in the machinery."

"You think a human hand was behind Mike Long's death?"

"What other kind of hand pushes an input button?"

"But how?" she insisted. "Oh, sure, someone . . . someone insane could program all sorts of ghastly accidents with a computer as complex as ours. But Mike was alone with the thing when it— I mean, when he was electrocuted."

"How do you know."

"Come again?"

"How do you know he was alone in there all night."

"The time locks. The doors lock at five-thirty, and there's just no way for anyone to open them from the outside until morning."

I stared across the mall at the floodlit columns of Town Hall for a time. Then I asked, "You have a key to the basement?"

"Of course. But it won't work at night."

"Maybe," I said. "You willing to help me find out?"

The door was heavy gauge steel. A man might be able to cut his way through in an hour or so with an oxyacetalene torch. But I was having lousy luck with Linda's key.

"See what I mean?" she whispered over my shoulder.

I said, "What are you whispering about? You think the thinkertinker in there can hear you?"

"Of course not," she laughed. "I always whisper when I'm breaking into public buildings. It's a hangover from my student radical days. Why not give it up, Ross? We're late for the gettogether up at Spinner's, and you'll be able to look the silly thinkertinker over in the morning."

"I've just got one thing I'd like to try," I insisted, taking out my wallet and removing the acetate cover from my driver's license. I inserted the sliver of plastic in the crack between the lock and the steel jam. And all hell broke lose.

"ATTENTION! ATTENTION! ATTENTION!" blared a metallic voice as, at the same time, a burglar alarm began to clang somewhere in the building above us. "THE TOWN HALL IS BEING BURGLARIZED. REPEAT. THE TOWN HALL IS BEING BURGLARIZED. THIS IS NO DRILL. ALL UNITS REPORT AT ONCE."

"Let's get out of here!" gasped Linda, pulling on my sleeve.

I said, "I'm with you!" And together we hurried up the cellar steps and just got outside when a police car pulled up, its blinker whirling a lariat of red beams around its head. A cop jumped out on either side, shotguns at port arms. One of them recognized Linda and shouted, "What's going on, Miss Crawford?"

"Kids," laughed Linda, pointing back the way we'd just come. She added, "They went thataway. There were two of them. About eight or ten years old, I'd say."

"What were they doing down there?" the nearest cop asked, staring at the side entrance leading to the basement of Town Hall.

I said, "Probably playing cops and robbers. I'll bet that alarm scared them out of a year's growth!"

"It certainly scared me!" murmured Linda at my side.

"The alarm's turned off!" I said. Linda and both cops looked blank. So I asked, "How does an automatic alarm know enough to shut itself off once the police arrive?"

Nobody answered for a time. Then one of the cops said,

"Beats me. But it always does. I think that big computer down there has some way of knowing when its call for help has been picked up. We respond by radio. Maybe that's it. Yeah, it must be hooked into our radio some way."

Linda looked at me and said, "Ross?"

"Maybe," I said. "Be awfully complicated to hook a shortwave receiver into such a sensitive alarm system. The memory banks alone would have to be something else if it decodes spoken police calls."

Turning to the cop, I asked, "Does this happen often? How many times a night does someone try to break into Town Hall?"

"Never happened before on *my* beat," replied the cop.

"But you said it always shuts down automatically, once you guys have responded to its alarm."

The cop nodded and said, "Sure, but you see, it calls us no matter what building's being burglarized. It's pretty peaceful here in Cybernia. But we do have a juvenile problem now and then. And sometimes one of the residents gets locked out and tries to crawl in a window so—"

"Hold it!" I cut in. "You mean to tell me the *houses* all have speaking burglar alarms? Not just the public buildings and this shopping center"

"That's right," said the cop. "That's the main reason things are so peaceful here in Cybernia. You just try and open one door or window you're not supposed to, and that there computer starts yelling its head off. Gives us the exact address and records the time on tape."

"Then shuts itself off as soon as the emergency's been responded to?"

"That's right."

"Nobody has to push a button or anything?"

"Not that I know of."

"How many houses are there in this valley?"

"I don't know. Four or five hundred maybe. They're building some more over across the lake."

"It won't scan," I muttered. "The wiring alone would have to be something that would give Marconi a running fit!"

"I don't know about no wiring," said the cop cheerfully. "But it sure works good. I've never seen a town as peaceful as Cybernia, and I used to work in Beverly Hills!"

"We're going to be late for the party, Ross," Linda Crawford was saying from somewhere outside my whirling thoughts. I dropped the microwave diagram I was building in my brain and, realizing she wanted to split the scene, said, "Oh, yeah, I forgot."

I hadn't forgotten Bradshaw Spinner's party. I hadn't been invited. But Linda insisted, as I escorted her to the underground parking lot beneath the mall, that the old man held open house. I still wasn't sure I wanted to go, however, until Linda said, "If anyone can explain the way Cybernia works, Dr. Spinner's the one. He practically built the whole place, you know."

"So Ed's been telling me," I said, taking her arm as we stepped into what looked like a telephone booth. The booth was a cylindrical elevator, and as it lowered us to the huge hidden garage Linda's car was parked in, I asked, "What about this guy, Gordon? The one who's supposed to have whipped your giant computer up out of baling wire and bomb sights."

"He's dead. His lawn mower killed him."

"So I heard— " I started to say. Then I blinked and stammered, "His *what* did *what* to *who?*"

"It was one of those freaky things," Linda explained. "Old Gordon was a self-taught electronic genius, I guess. But he was working on this idea of an automated lawn mower running along a buried magnetic cable under his lawn when . . . Well, something went wrong. Dr. Spinner can tell you more about it than I can. He found the body. What there was left of it."

"Glug!" I grimaced. "You mean the lawn mower started up or something and . . ."

"Ran over him," finished Linda. Then she had to add, "Three or four times, apparently. It was an electric rotary, and somehow it started while he was working on it. Gordon fell across a length of the cable. The cable was looped. So . . ."

"The lawn mower followed it around and around and over and over?"

"Yes. I didn't see it, but they say it was pretty awful."

"What did the coroner list it as—computer error?"

"Would you believe me if I said, 'Operating a wheeled vehicle under the influence of alcohol'?"

"Gordon was drunk?"

"Always. Aside from being a genius, he was a hopeless alcoholic."

I thought about that as the elevator stopped, and Linda lead the way past a dozen parked cars to her own blue and white 'Vette. I made a mental note that she made good money for a key puncher. But that didn't worry me half as much as what she'd just told me about the man who'd designed and assembled Cybernia's master computer. Lots of geniuses had been drunks, I knew. Edgar Allan Poe had been a drunk. It hadn't stopped him from writing some damned fine stuff. Though now that I thought about it, Poe's writing had been sort of weird.

I wondered what sort of thing an alcoholic, self-taught electronic genius would turn out, given plenty of time and more than enough money to let his imagination go ape.

When Linda had said Bradshaw Spinner was holding open house, she hadn't been kidding. There were thirty or forty couples crawling around the premises by the time we arrived. The house sprawled along the north ridge of the valley, and I could see at a glance why the old man had built it just outside the property line of the Cybernia Corporation's planned development. Houses in Cybernia were restricted to traditional American architecture. The Spinner place looked like something Buck Rogers dreamed up in a moment of temporary insanity. It was all cubes and angles, mostly glass, with a flat roof and what looked like an astronomical observatory tacked on one end.

Linda had explained on the way up that Spinner was doing some sort of electronic research on his own and that the power requirements were a bit much. He had his own generator built into the hillside and except for telephone lines was completely independent from the rest of the world.

Linda started introducing me to people. None of whom seemed too interested in meeting me and vice versa. A morose hatchet-faced man she said was Pete Couver offered to get us something to drink. But he never reappeared with anything, and the next time I spotted him, he was staring soberly down the front of a pneumatic

blonde's dress. Linda said he was a member of the City Council. If that meant anything.

We worked our way over to the bar, near the doorway leading to the terrace, and a pleasant male voice said, "Why, hello, Linda. It's vodka tonic, isn't it?"

We turned to face a heavyset man with skin tanned to the color of an English saddle and a halo of snow white hair. I knew, even before Linda introduced us, that I was staring at Bradshaw Spinner, Ph.D.

Spinner seemed younger than I'd expected. He had to be pushing eighty. But apparently the legendary scientist was one of those men who make up their minds what they want to look like at fifty and somehow manage to stay that way until carcinoma or cardiac arrest catches up with them. As he was fixing Linda's drink, he smiled at me and said, "Your brand would be Glenfiddich, wouldn't it, Mr. MacLean?"

I laughed and asked, "Who told you that—Ed Morton?"

"The name," explained Spinner. "Somehow, I just can't see any man from the West Highlands drinking Cutty and water."

Then he asked, "Where *is* Ed, by the way? I was expecting him up here this evening."

"He's still at his place as far as I know," I replied. "Ed said something about you having a party tonight, Dr. Spinner. But he seems to be a little uptight and—"

"My friends call me Brad, ah . . . ?"

"Ross, ah, Brad."

"Poor Ed," Spinner mused, handing Linda her glass and starting to mix me a Scotch and water. "He's still on that thing about the machines being out to get him, eh?"

"Well," I replied, "he does have one particular machine [illegible]"

"Poor Gordon's baby," Spinner said, handing me my drink. "That's the trouble with laymen. They're so damned anthropomorphic. You're an EDP man, aren't you, Ross?"

"Yes, Ed asked me to take a look at whatever it was

Gordon put together under Town Hall. It seems to be talking back to him of late."

"I know," said Spinner. Then he smiled at Linda and asked, "What do you think, honey? Has the computer been getting fresh with you and the other girls?"

Linda smiled, albeit her eyes were clouded as she answered, "Hardly anything so interesting, Brad. But, well, it *has* been throwing out some odd output."

"Oh? What sort of output, Linda?"

"Well, for one thing, it keeps asking for more information. I mean, all sorts of crazy information."

"How so crazy, honey?"

"It wants to know about the damnedest things. It seems to be on an ecology kick, and we've been feeding it page after page of *Scientific American* and odd little magazines like *Aquarium News.*"

"That's not so strange," said Spinner. "It's supposed to be concerned with the ecology of this valley, you know."

"I guess so," Linda said. "But it's certainly been a lot of work for my crew. Translating all that reading material into FORTRAN takes time, you know."

"FORTRAN?" said the elderly scientist. Then he nodded in sudden comprehension and said, "Oh, it has to be coded before the machine can use it, eh? I'm afraid cybernetics is not my field. But I take it you can't simply *talk* to a computer, eh?"

"Not yet," I said. "FORTRAN is a mathematical language based on place value. The computer's relays only receive on and off, period. So each bit of information has to be reduced to a series of ones and zeros. Letters of the alphabet have numerical values which, when punched on the cards—"

"Negative on key punch," Linda cut in. "Our current input's recorded directly on tape."

"Punched paper tape?" I asked.

"Magnetic," Linda replied.

"In FORTRAN?"

"Sure. What's wrong, Ross?"

"You can't input that way."

"The heck we can't!" Linda laughed uncertainly.

"What do you think we've been doing down there all these weeks?"

"Good question," I mused. "What code's the readout [illegible]"

"English," she replied. "It's got this IBM compositor with galley rolls, and it outputs in English. IBM Manifold type sans lower case."

"That's screwy," I insisted. "What's its vocabulary? The whole eight-hundred Basic English words with additional symbols?"

"It just types out plain old English English," insisted Linda.

"It can't," I said flatly.

"Well, it does," the girl said. "I don't know just what its total vocabulary is. But it doesn't seem to have any trouble saying anything it wants."

"You two will have to excuse me," Bradshaw Spinner cut in. "But this conversation's going right over my head. I take it you think there's something wrong with a computer that speaks English, Ross?"

"Without someone translating for it?" I mused. "I guess it's possible. But have you any idea how big a memory bank would have to be available for the decoder to type out every word in the dictionary and then string them together well enough for anyone to make sense out of?"

"Seems to me I read something in *Science Digest* about a computer translating Russian into English, didn't I?"

"Oh, you can translate from one language to another, using a computer and a little knowledge of both grammars. Magnetic tape can store and match almost anything. But basically a human operator has to type out the Russian word in numerical code and— Wait, you *can* program it so that each letter has a code, and then the circuits match them up with their stored opposite numbers in another language. Then with the decoder set and someone competent enough to string the garbled sentences together—"

"I'm sorry I asked," groaned Bradshaw Spinner.

"It's sort of complicated," I said sheepishly. We go through this a lot with laymen. And from my point of

view the old man was just that. Sure, Bradshaw Spinner had been preaching something he called pragmatecnics and trying to get people to build three-wheeled cars for as long as I could remember. But the old man was a thinker, not an EDP man.

"We can argue about codes in the morning," said Linda, catching the bored look on Spinner's face. I agreed, and Bradshaw Spinner asked if I'd seen the view from his terrace.

I said I hadn't. So he lead the way as Linda and I followed him out on to what seemed to be a concrete slab about to slide off down the mountain. I had to admit, once I'd found my way to a guard rail, that the view was something else.

Cybernia was larger than it looked, once you got above it. The valley floor was spangled with the winking lights of the homes and the larger buildings grouped around the lake. The lake, or rather the reservoir, was larger than I'd thought, too. I asked him about the fishing, and Spinner said, "It's great. The lake's stocked with silversides to keep the algae down, and we've perch and pickerel to keep the silversides under control."

"Who keeps the game fish under control?"

"We do. The kids catch the perch, and the more serious fishermen reel in the pickerel. You can fish from shore or, down at that far end, rent a boat. Needless to say, motor boats are forbidden. Some of the younger folk wanted to water-ski. But the computer worked it out, and the lake's too small."

"I've seen them water-ski on smaller lakes than that one."

"I daresay. But then, they hadn't worked it out pragmatecnically."

I didn't ask him what pragmatecnology was. So naturally, he started to tell me.

"Some people seem to think anything that's modern is pragmatecnic," he pontificated. "But, of course, it's not. That's why they're having so many problems in Columbia and Revson these days. Some slick young architects thought all you had to do to build a town of the future was

to design futuristic houses and keep the unwashed types out. But you see, it's hardly that simple. It took us five years just to get what you see down there on paper. We culled through everything man has learned over the past six thousand years and only skimmed the cream. For instance, Jeff Hendricks, our chief architect, knew American colonial was the easiest style for a town this size to live with. So we built modest, unassuming, but *livable* homes. Naturally every home down there has every modern convenience. All-electric heating and appliances: garbage disposal, laundry-processing system, automated garage doors, and you name it. But nevertheless, well, homey. The sort of homes kids can put roots down in. We planned every phase of the community the same way. The shopping is convenient, located at the best possible place, and economically sound. It's highly efficient. But we were careful to include candy stores and neighborhood hangouts while we were at it. Cybernia's not just another dormitory suburb, Ross. It's a home town. The kind of home town everyone dreams of but never finds outside an Andy Hardy picture."

"I noticed the picket fences," I said. "What are those bigger buildings over there—factories?"

The old man nodded. "We've encouraged some light industry. The trouble with growing up in a place like Columbia is that even if you like it, you have to move away to find a job. As you know, we've our own power plant and, with cheap electricity, data processing companies, a dry-type printing and bookbinding firm, and an outfit that manufactures transistors have moved in to grow with the town. Someday a man will be able to spend his entire life here in this valley without ever having to go outside for anything. Commuting is simply not pragmatecnical when you get right down to it."

"Didn't you get into a hassle over commuting a while back?" I asked. "Seems to me I saw you on television, arguing with some senators about a combined monorail and elevated highway system linking Boston to Washington by way of New York."

"Oh, *that*." The old man shrugged. "They wouldn't lis-

ten, the blind morons. They're spending billions of our tax dollars on a hare-brained program of superhighways and more lines of conventional railway track when—if only they could see—the pragmatecnic solution would be—Hey, what's going on down there?"

"The lights are blinking," said Linda, as if the two of us were blind. She was right though. Every light in the valley was going off and on like it'd suddenly decided it was a firefly. Then as we watched, every light in the valley winked out!

"Power failure?" wondered Bradshaw Spinner. "I don't understand it." He turned to glance inside his own well-lit living room and grimaced. "Thank God, I've my own generator. But what could have gone wrong down there in Cybernia?"

"I see a light!" said Linda, pointing at a distant spot of flickering orange on the far side of the blacked-out valley. Then Spinner and I both said almost at once, "That's no light. That's a *fire!*"

As if to verify our guess, the lonesome wail of a siren rose from somewhere below on the utter darkness. Spinner said, "This is crazy! Every house we built down there is supposed to be fireproof!"

"One of them's going up like a torch!" I said.

By this time we'd been joined by others on the terrace. The man Linda had introduced as Pete Couver shouted, "Hey, whose house is on fire? What in hell's happened to all the lights down there?"

As if to answer him, the lamps of every house in the valley suddenly winked back on. All but one of them. Even with the lights back on, you could see the red glare from that one burning home. A woman in a print dress screamed, "That's *our* house! Oh, my God, the children!"

"Take it easy, hon," a man who must have been her husband soothed. "I can tell our place by the red drapes in the picture window. It's three houses down from the one that's on fire and— Jesus! That's Ed Morton's place!"

Whoever he was, the man had been right. The police had blocked the road a couple of driveways down from Morton's. But as we drove up in Linda's 'Vette, one of them recognized us, and we were allowed to pass through the barricade on foot.

Cybernia had no regular fire department. The police emergency rescue squad took care of such blazes as the fire-resistant homes offered from time to time. They were bringing Ed Morton out as we got there. He was wrapped in a plastic body bag.

"What happened?" I asked a man wearing an ambulance orderly's white uniform. He frowned at me, and then spotting Linda at my side, he shrugged and said, "Freak accident, I guess. We found Mr. Morton against the front door, dead from smoke inhalation. Funny thing about that door. He'd beaten his hands bloody against the inside, only it was . . . *open*. I mean, unlocked. It was closed when we got here. But if only he'd had sense enough to turn the knob . . ."

"Do these homes have electric door locks?" I asked Linda. She said, "No. Just regular cylinder locks and—Wait a minute. They *do* have electric sensors. The burglar alarms go off if anyone puts a wrong key in the lock. First you get a warning voice that you're using the wrong key. Then unless you take it out, all hell breaks loose!"

"The alarm system was off," said the ambulance attendant. "We had that power blackout, and I guess that's why the fire alarm didn't alert Mr. Morton when the place started to burn. Look, I gotta go, folks. The coroner's expecting us."

As the attendant climbed in beside Ed Morton's bagged body, the two of us walked slowly up the walk. My car was still there, parked behind Ed's Toronado. A man in a police captain's uniform nodded to us as we approached, and I told him I'd move my car if he wanted.

"Fire's completely out," said the captain. "But we would like to clear this driveway. Municipal maintenance is sending someone over to check this screwy thing out, and they'll want to use the driveway. I'll have one of the boys run Mr. Morton's car over to the underground garage, and anyone who's interested can pick it up whenever they want. Mr. Morton had a wife, didn't he?"

"Divorced," I said, opening my own car's trunk.

"Yeah, I forgot," mused the police captain. "Sure screwy, the way it happened."

"Just what do you think did happen?" asked Linda.

"Well, I better wait and see what the maintenance men say. But if you want an educated guess, it was that power blackout just now. Somehow, every circuit breaker in the valley went out at once. Only the power was still on and in this house the circuit breakers stayed open."

"My God!" gasped Linda. "You mean the entire output of the municipal power plant surged into this one house?"

"Looks like it," replied the police official. "Looks like the copper wires in there literally exploded from the overload. Of course, the house is built of fire-resistant materials. So once the wallpaper, carpet, and drapes went, the fire burned itself right out. Not soon enough to do poor Mr. Morton any good, though. Funny how he panicked like that. If only he'd turned the door knob the right way . . . But I guess he was pretty frightened and— Oh-oh, here comes Doc Spinner. He's really going to give somebody hell for this, I'll bet."

Linda and I turned as Bradshaw Spinner pulled his car

to a halt at the foot of the drive. The car, naturally, was one of those three-wheeled electric things he's been building for years.

It looked something like a big black beetle, and I wondered idly how far he could drive it before he needed a recharge. One of his pet hates, as I remembered reading, was the internal combustion engine. He'd been saying, long before the current ecology fad, they were just not pragmatecnical.

Spinner climbed out and hurried up the drive as Linda went to meet him. She was still filling him in when I joined them with my EDP kit. The old man frowned at the heavy case in my hand and asked what it was. I said, "Special tools. Some of those printed circuits are a bit much for a guy to tackle with a screwdriver and monkey wrench."

"It was in that fire?" he asked.

"My car," I corrected. "If it's okay with you, sir, I'd sort of like to have a look at that . . . that thing in Town Hall."

"Of course," said the city planner. But Linda said, "Ross, the door's locked, remember?"

"I remember," I answered grimly. "But I've got some gizmos in here the Yale lock people would just as soon not hear about. If you can just hold off the fuzz while that damned alarm's screaming for help, I think I can open the time lock."

"I'm sure none of the other members of the City Council will have any objections," said Spinner. "But I just thought of something, Ross. Maybe—I know this is crazy—but maybe that freak overload was meant for that kit you hold in your hand at this very moment!"

"Come again?"

"Look," the old man insisted, "I know I've been laughing at poor Ed and his persecution complex. But what if he had something after all? I mean he was killed, dammit! Killed by what looks, so far, like computer error! But, suppose it wasn't an error? Suppose it was deliberate?"

"Okay," I said. "Let's say, just for the hell of it, that the thinkertinker deliberately overloaded Ed's house wiring.

Let's even say it locked him in somehow until it was too late for him to get out of the house. What's all that got to do with this EDP kit?"

"Maybe that was what it was after!" said the old man soberly.

I looked down at the metal case in my left hand and said, "Come on, it was in my car all the time!"

"You know that, and I know that," insisted Spinner. "But how are we to be certain the computer knew that?"

"You mean it set fire to Ed's house just to burn up my tools?"

"That's exactly what I mean, Ross!"

"You've got to be kidding!"

Bradshaw Spinner stared thoughtfully at the still smoldering shell of Ed Morton's house and sighed, "I only wish I was, son!"

After all the hullabaloo about clearing my burglary attempt with the fuzz, the actual entry turned out to be an anticlimax. When we got to Town Hall, the basement door to the input room was perfectly willing to open as soon as Linda's key was in its lock.

I followed her inside with old Bradshaw Spinner and another member of the City Council named Greenspan bringing up the rear.

The lights went on automatically as we entered. No big deal. I spotted the photoelectric beam as soon as I looked for it. I set the EDP kit on a nearby console table and looked around the room. There wasn't much to see. Linda's work space took up perhaps a fifth of the basement. The rest was occupied by . . . by what, for God's sake?

A solid wall of IBM components completely blocked any view I might have had of the rest of the basement area. I walked along a bank of chattering tape reels 3420 units to the far end of the space, and then I came back to ask Linda if there was an access panel to the rear. She said there wasn't. I shrugged and answered, "So we'll just have to muscle one of these units out of line and—"

"Mike Long tried," said Linda. "He said they seemed to be bolted to the floor or something."

"Well, for chrissake, what's behind all those units?" I insisted. "None of them can run more than a couple of feet back. That leaves us with maybe eight hundred square feet of . . . of what?"

"That's what Mike Long wanted to know," said Linda.

I opened the kit and muttered, "Okay. We start with the part we can see. You up to running a few standard checks, Linda?"

"Sure," the girl said, going over to one of the five input consoles in a row near the door. She seated herself at one, flipped a couple of switches, and asked, "What shall we start with, Ross?"

"Shoot some standard digital tests," I replied, sitting down beside her and switching on another input keyboard. "Meanwhile, I'll throw in some logic test patterns."

"What are they doing?" whispered Councilman Greenspan.

"Trying to see if the thing works," muttered Bradshaw Spinner.

He was right, more or less.

I typed out A 3/2, A 3/2, 1 ≠3/2, 1—=3/2, 1=3/2 and asked for a floating point. Then I got up and walked down to the inconveniently located output teletype at the far end. A series of Linda's digital numbers spattered

across the paper and then the computer wrote, "A=1, A=1.5, 1=1, 1 .1, NOT ALLOWED. 3 AND 2 ARE NOT IN THE SAME MODE."

I tore the sheet off and walked back to Linda's console. I showed it to her and said, "Things are getting curiouser and curiouser, Alice. Look at the readout I got."

Linda looked at the printed answer and said, "It's the right one, isn't it?"

"Sort of," I said. "Only this monstrosity's input section is more or less supposed to be from an IBM 360 M 75 system, isn't it?"

"I guess so. What's the problem?"

"The problem," I answered grimly, "is that I sent Burroughs code through the loops!"

Linda stared at me for a time before she said softly, "You operated an IBM keyboard with the Burroughs computer code, and it gave you the right answer with an IBM type ball?"

"Yeah, and I programmed it to call the operator's attention to incorrect procedure, too. Play with some duodecimal math conversions while I take another look at that so-called IBM output!"

This time Spinner and Greenspan followed me down to the other end of the tape banks as Linda punched the keys. The older man muttered, "I'm not certain I follow all this, Ross. Are you saying there's something fishy about the way this stuff's been working?"

I frowned. "More like something human. You can work one system's code with the code of another, but you have to reprogram it first. Apparently this particular system receives anything you feel like feeding it and works things out for itself."

"Is that possible?"

"No. But it's doing it."

The type head was chattering, now, as it converted Linda's decimal numbers into duodecimal theory. I read, "9=9, 10=ALPHA, 11 BETA, 12=10, 13=11, 14=12." Then Greenspan said, "Hey, that's all wrong, isn't it?"

Bradshaw Spinner started to explain the pragmatecnic advantages of base twelve math as I pried away the sheet

metal IBM label over the typing ball. Behind me Spinner stopped lecturing poor Greenspan to ask, "What's that you're doing, Ross?"

"This thing infringes on the typing ball patent. But it was never made by IBM," I explained as the label, coming free, exposed another brand name. Then I muttered, "Oh no, this is too much!"

"Find anything?"

"Edmond's Scientific Laboratory," I groaned. "That's a mail order house in South Jersey. They advertise in *Electronics Illustrated* among other places."

"My God, you mean this . . . this output unit was made by a mail order house?"

"I don't think so," I replied. "Some of the circuit components maybe. But this type ball's been improvised by some sort of lost-wax casting. Your friend Gordon had a grotesque sense of humor when he put this thing together. If Gordon ever *did* put it together, that is. I'm sort of beginning to think it just grew, like Topsy."

"Let me get this straight," insisted Spinner. "According to you, this computer system is assembled from incompatible parts made by different companies?"

"Loud and clear. The IBM parts don't match, either. They're from totally different systems. Yet, as you can see, the damned thing's talking back to us!"

There was a chatter from the type head, and I glanced down, expecting to see another series of the duodecimal conversions Linda was inputting at the other end of the room. Instead, the output read, "ALL THIS IS VERY INTERESTING, BUT I HAVE TO CHECK OUT THE MUNICIPAL POWER SYSTEM, AND THERE IS AN OVERLOAD IN THE SEWAGE DISPOSAL PLANT. THIS SECTION OF MY ENTITY SHALL SHUT DOWN UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE. GOOD NIGHT."

At the other end of the room Linda said, "Hey, this console's gone dead, Ross!"

"You tin son of a bitch!" I marveled, kicking the nearest recording unit as its lights went dead. I don't know if there was any connection, but that's when the lights went out.

"I'm getting out of here!" gasped Greenspan.

He was not alone. I ran to the door and blocked it, just in time to keep it from closing on us. "Get me the kit!" I shouted to anyone who'd listen. Bradshaw Spinner was the first to come unstuck, and moving with surprising speed for such a large and elderly man, he scooped up my tool case and joined me at the automated door. I fumbled it open, spilling goodies all over the concrete floor as I reached for a Phillips screwdriver, gave one of the retaining screws over the latch a savage wrench, and muttered, "Now, you wise-ass hunk of junk!"

"What are you doing?" asked Spinner mildly.

"Hand me that gizmo that looks like a flattened crescent wrench, will you?"

He bent over, picked up the tool I'd indicated, and handed it to me. A moment later, still fighting the surges of the door's pneumatic mechanism with my sheer weight, I'd unscrewed the cylinder of the lock, yanked it out, and stepped aside. The door clanked shut, plunging us in total darkness. But I said, "Not to worry. I've pulled its teeth."

"So why are we still locked in?" asked Greenspan, lighting a match.

I said, "Let the pneumatic door closer relax. It thinks the door's locked. So the pressure has no reason to be on."

True to my words, the next time I shoved the steel door, it opened easily. I held it as Linda and the two men filed out. Then there was a frantic clicking near the place the bolt used to be, and I could feel the pneumatics surge again. I stepped outside, laughed, and said, "Let the silly door think it's closed and locked itself a second time."

It was Bradshaw Spinner who pointed out my lapse into anthropromorphism as we were going up the stairs. "Ross," he murmured, "you said back there you intended to let the computer *think* it had locked us in for the night."

"Slip of the tongue," I said. "But dammit, the silly thing *does* act too human for comfort!"

"I'm not about to argue," sighed the old scientist. "I'll have to admit, for a moment there, I actually thought poor Gordon was playing one of his sick little jokes on us. The man had a warped sense of humor, you know. And to

a drunk, locking the three of us in a dark room might have made sense!"

"But Gordon's dead!" Greenspan said. "Are you trying to say his ghost is running that thing in there?"

"I don't believe in ghosts," growled Bradshaw Spinner. "Ghosts are just not logical from a pragmatecnical point of view. But dammit, folks, that . . . that thing in there sure as hell acts like old Gordon. He did program it in the first place, you know. Isn't it possible he, well, gave it some of his own personality traits?"

I started to say a computer couldn't have a personality. But then I remembered that this particular thinkertinker did have one. One I didn't like at all!

The next day was Saturday, and the circuits in the input room were still completely dead. But even though it didn't seem to want to talk to anyone, the system was still running the town. Just for the hell of it, I jimmied a door on the side of Councilman Greenspan's Cape Cod. All hell broke loose as the alarm went off.

The power plant was running itself, although the maintenance crews were trying to trace the source of the temporary blackout without much luck. Meanwhile, I decided I might as well trace as many sensor lines as I could before the thinkertinker started swearing at me again.

Linda joined me in the cupola atop Town Hall. I was

looking over the photoelectric cells I'd found up there by following one of the wires the computer seemed to have spread like sarcoma threads all through the building. Linda was wearing a trim set of bells and a functional pullover sweater as she climbed up through the trap door and said, "They told me downstairs you were up here chasing bats or something."

I pointed at the bank of electric eyes and said, "This would seem to be our weird system's eye in the sky. More like a hundred, when you get right down to it. Some idiot's attached ten rows of ten photocells to this pegboard panel. Damned if I can figure out why!"

"The street lamps are automated," Linda mused. "And those cells are facing north, away from the sun at any hour. Couldn't they detect the brightness of the northern sky and signal when it was time to turn on the lights?"

"Sure. But why use a hundred?"

"Backup system in case one of them failed? Could they be hooked in series?"

"Negative. Each cell has a separate wire running down this IBX cable here to the computer room. Where they go after that is anybody's guess."

"They say Gordon was a drunk," she said.

"That's too easy," I objected. "The old boy knew what he was doing when he wired this mess together. It's been running the whole valley *without maintenance* ever since he was murdered by his lawn mower!"

"Well, doesn't that sort of prove my point?"

"That every component of the system has a backup in reserve? If each of these electric eyes sent the same message, it wouldn't matter if half of them burned out."

"Maybe. But for Pete's sake, a *hundred* backup parts?"

"That would explain what's behind the visible part down in the basement, wouldn't it?"

"You mean, there's another component behind each one we can see, all the way to the rear wall?"

"Why not?"

"Won't scan, doll. You just don't get the kind of computer we seem to have down there with what it's chosen to show us. You know what I really think? I think that IBM

stuff's just a front. I think the input leads back into a hidden room where some crazy old Chinaman with an abacus is playing games with me!"

"Oh, Ross, that's the craziest idea so far!"

"I know it's crazy," I said. "But so's an inanimate machine with a mind of its own and homicidal tendencies."

"You really think Ed Morton was murdered?"

"He didn't commit suicide. But he did say the machine was out to get him, remember?"

"It was probably just one of those things," she murmured uncertainly.

"You mean, computer error?"

"Well, computers do make mistakes, you know."

"Only when somebody pushes the wrong button."

The girl thought a moment before she asked cautiously, "Is that what you're suggesting, Ross? That someone . . . someone here in Cybernia is behind all this?"

"Unless you buy two other possibilities," I answered. "The fire at Ed's house was a one-in-a-million accident. Or on the other hand, Gordon was a whirling genius who actually managed to create a computer system with a mind of its own."

"They both sound pretty wild, don't they?"

"They sound impossible," I said. "But murders are what old Spinner would call pragmatecnically logical."

"How can you joke about it at a time like this?"

"It's not easy. But it beats screaming."

Linda brushed a strand of hair from her forehead and grimaced as she muttered, "Speak for yourself, John. Where do we go from here?"

"I'm not sure. What's the nearest town large enough to have a hardware store open on Saturday?"

"Mahwah, I guess. You want me to run you over in my car?"

"Save me getting lost again." Then I asked, "While we're on the subject of girl guides—you wouldn't happen to know where this Coroner Drukker lives, would you?"

"Oom Piet? Sure. If we take King's Road over to Mahwah, we pass his place. It's not too far from here."

"Good enough," I said. "Let's leave this place to the bats again, shall we?"

Linda nodded, and then her eyes grew thoughtful as she said, "What's that?"

"What's what?" I replied.

"Those photoelectric eyes," she answered. "A couple of them just winked at me!"

"They what?"

"Well, they sort of glowed then. Two or three of them near the middle of the panel seemed to light up for a moment."

I studied the bank of photoelectric cells for a moment before I said, "Selium units only detect light. They don't ordinarily give any off."

"Well, those did," she insisted. "It was just for the barest fraction of a second. But I'm sure two or three of them lit up!"

"Trick of the atmosphere," I suggested, glancing out through the louvered windows at the sky. Then I added, "Looks like it's fixing to rain, and you probably caught a passing cloud at a funny angle. Those cells are highly reflective. But they do not, repeat, do not light up. Like no filaments to carry the charge even in the unlikely event someone was crazy enough to try and use them for light bulbs."

"Let's get out of here," she said, shuddering. "You've gotten me doing it now."

"Doing what, doll?"

"Seeing electronic ghosts. I know it's crazy, Ross, but for a moment there, I was sure those damned things were, well, watching me!"

The overcast had turned to a light drizzle by the time we pulled into the gravel drive of the Drukker farm. Linda's 'Vette had turned out, on closer inspection, to be less expensive than it looked. The engine idled rough, and she said she was having trouble with the brakes. She'd picked it up secondhand, and so far it had nickled and dimed her to death.

She parked near the porch steps of the weathered two-story house. As I walked around to open the door on her side, a gaunt individual in a rusty black suit came to the screen door and stared out at us silently. Linda got out and waved to him. He didn't wave back.

We mounted the steps, and for lack of anything better to say, I asked, "Are you Mr. Drukker?"

"Depends," the man replied. "Anybody dead? I mean, since that outlander got burnt the other night over to Cybernia?"

"Not that I know of," I said smiling.

"Then I ain't selling," snapped Drukker.

"Selling what, for Pete's sake?"

"My land, of course. Nobody never asks my name unless someone just died or they want to buy me out. But you just go on about your business and tell old Henry Ford I ain't selling. I got *bones* buried back in them

woods, young feller. I don't care what you be offerin'. I ain't selling!"

"We're not from the Ford Motor Company, Mr. Drukker."

"Well, I ain't selling to no Catholic church, neither. I know Ford and the Catholic church aim to buy up every parcel of land hereabouts. But like I just said, I got bones buried in them woods."

"Don't you remember me, Oom Piet?" laughed Linda. "I was over here with Emily one time, remember?"

Piet Drukker stared at us like a wooden Indian, which he rather resembled, as a matter of fact. Then, cautiously he said, "You be that Miss Crawford over to Cybernia?"

"That's right. Emily and I work together."

"Emily says you be all right," grunted the dark Jersey Dutchman. Then he opened the screen door and added, "Come in and set you both."

We followed Drukker into an immaculate parlor, and he called, "Hilde? We got folk visitin' in the front. Be you fetching the *kake og koffie?*"

I started to ask a question. But Linda shot me a warning look, and we waited until a large motherly woman came out wearing a smile and bearing refreshments. Her moon face was pure Amerindian. Yet the hair Hilde Drukker wore in braids on either side of her broad head was the color of sun-bleached wheat. She said something in what sounded like German or Dutch and vanished back into her kitchen.

Drukker said, "Hilde these cakes herself *gemaked. Eten. Eten* the two of you."

We did, commenting on how delicious the cookies were as Drukker slowly thawed enough to ask us what we were after, aside from his land.

I said, "I understand you officiated at the inquest of a man named Gregory Gordon two or three years back."

Drukker thought a moment. Then he laughed dryly and said, "*Ja,* that damn fool outlander who ran himself over with his own lawn mower. He did make a mess out of himself, by Jesus!"

"The body was badly mutilated then?"

"Mutilated? It was and that be a fact. That damn machine over him ran a couple of times, it did."

"Is there any chance, sir, that the body might not have been that of Gregory Gordon?"

"I am not a sir. I am Oom Piet," he said, frowning. Then he asked, "What do you mean, it might not have been Gordon? Who do you think we buried if it wasn't that fool outlander?"

"I don't know. For all I know, it really *was* Gordon. But you see, I've a reason for wanting to be sure."

"Wait," said Drukker, getting to his feet and going over to a maple secretary near a grandfather clock that had stopped at half-past four. He rummaged through a drawer until he'd found what he was looking for. Then he said, "*Ja*, Gordon. Gregory Gordon. It says so. Right here on his death certificate."

"Who identified the body?"

"His friends, of course. I didn't know the damned outlander. Never saw him before he himself got killed."

"Then it's just possible the man mangled by that runaway mower was somebody else?"

"You mean to say I might be stupid or crazy, mister?"

Linda cut in soothingly to explain. "Of course not, Oom Piet. Why, Emily says you're one of the smartest men in the county!"

"That's why I be coroner," affirmed Drukker, somewhat soothed. Then he frowned down at me and asked, "You been hearing things about us, young feller?"

"Hearing things, sir—I mean, Oom Piet?"

"Oh, I mind what they say over in Mahwah," he growled. "I mind how Emily home came, crying, when they made her go to school over there. I mind them city folk saying she was a Jackson White with six toes and how we be supposed to be runaway slaves. You see them woods out there, young feller? I own five hundred acres of them woods, free and clear. I got a deed signed in Holland Dutch to my great-great-granddaddy saying them five hundred acres be Drukker land. And you know who *signed* that deed, mister? Myheer Theo Van Couver of the Dutch East India Company. That's who signed that deed!

You think the Dutch East India Company would deed five hundred acres to a runaway slave?"

"It doesn't seem logical," I replied.

"Of course it don't. We got bones buried on this land older than the United States of America, by God! But them damned outlanders over to Mahwah call us Jackson Whites and say we marry our own sisters and have six toes and no common sense worth mention!"

Linda said, "Tell Ross what happened when your young people started bussing to the schools in Mahwah, Oom Piet."

The old man chuckled dryly and said, "Well, I guess we did show them a thing or two that time. They laughed at our young folk because of the way they dressed and spoke. But when it came time to mark the report cards, our young folk scored higher than half them sassy outlanders, and that be a fact!"

"The, ah, Elder Folk have an average IQ way above the standard norm," explained Linda. "They seem to be amazingly healthy, too."

"We live right and go to church regular," said Drukker. "My grandfather lived to be a hundred and ten. Might have lived longer had not he come with lung fever one winter. I'll tell you something else about him, too. He had ten fingers and ten toes when we buried him. You want me to take off my shoes?"

"Of course not!" I said. Then recovering, I added, "You look like anyone else to me, Oom Piet."

"I be a mite dark," he conceded. "We got us Delaware blood aways back. But ain't none of us ever married closer than first cousin, and that be a fact!"

"Well, maybe you do look something like Anthony Quinn, now that you mention it," I lied. "But getting back to Gregory Gordon's identification—"

"His fingerprints up matched in Washington," snapped Drukker.

"You checked his prints with the FBI?"

"Well, of course I did! What think you I be, some kind of a outlander fool?"

"No, Oom Piet," I sighed truthfully this time. "I can see you're a man who takes his job seriously."

"That's why I be coroner," said Drukker, a trifle smugly.

Linda's brakes were giving her trouble all the way into Mahwah, and on King's Road freaky brakes are not easy on the nerves. So while I scouted for an open hardware store, Linda had her car looked over in a nearby service station.

I found the hardware store with no sweat. They had most of what I wanted. But the man behind the counter said he'd have to order the fine-tipped cutting nozzle from his supplier on Monday.

"What do you figure to burn open, a wrist watch?" he asked.

I told him that was close enough, and he took my order. I carried the rest of the stuff over to the filling station, and Linda asked what I'd picked up.

"Oxyacetalene," I replied. "What's with the brakes?"

"They've been fixed," she replied. "The man said there was oil in the drums."

"Oil? That's odd."

"That's what he just told me. He said I was lucky the brakes held at all. But not to worry. They're all right now."

"Let's hope so," I said, stowing my purchases in back of the seat. "It's starting to rain again, and that King's Road is pretty frantic even when it's dry. Who designed that two-lane roller coaster anyway?"

"WPA, I think. There weren't any roads through those hills before the 1930s."

Driving back to Cybernia, I started to believe her. The rain was coming down harder now, and the damp woods closed in on either side, making the road a gloomy tunnel that slithered up and over the washboard ridges with complete disregard for the mechanics of highway grading. Another disturbing thing about King's Road (though I was starting to get used to it by this time) was the eerie emptiness of so much country that close to New York. We'd pass through little towns that seemed for all the world like part of the sloburbians sprawl that disfigures so much of the East Coast. But between the ticky-tacky little clots of summer cabins and roadside stands, there were these long stretches of second-growth jungle. From time to time we'd pass a farm, and some of them had Pennsylvania Dutch hex signs painted on them. I commented on this to Linda and she said, "Summer people. Lots of writers and artists bought places out here before land started getting expensive again."

"So where do these, ah, Elder Folk of yours live—in trees?"

"Back in the hollows," she explained. "This road we're on is only a thread through quite a tract of sheer wilderness. See that little dirt road we just passed? I'll bet if you took that, you'd come, after a while, to a little Dutch Reform Church with a few homes clustered around it. Folks back there are snowed in all winter, and they don't come out much at any other time of the year. Of course, it's all changing today. The original settlers are fighting a losing battle against what Bradshaw Spinner calls pragmateenics."

"Old Drukker doesn't figure to sell those bones he's got buried in his woods."

"No. But his niece Emily will, once the old people pass away. The younger generation out this way are just like

anyone else in the television age. Some of them may be sort of dark, and a few are downright surly. But they're not stupid, and they've had education rammed down their throats. Then, of course, they're exposed to New York television. You can pick up 'The Johnny Carson Show' out here in full color with a good antenna, and they sell hot pants in the Ringwood general store. Even without the realty developers moving in, our version of civilization seems to be catching."

"It's too bad in a way," I sighed. "I like Old Drukker, and it's sort of fun to find him so close to New York. Like meeting Dan'l Boone in Central Park. Hell, I'll bet you can *see* the Empire State Building from the top of that mountain up ahead!"

"Not quite," Linda said. "But the view from up there is something else. Mostly, the Elder Folk stay down in the hollows. Not too many of them have ever been as far as Route 17, let alone the Hudson itself. You could just about walk to New York from here, yet I've never seen any of them south of the Pompton Lakes. Sooner or later, though, they're going to be moved off their land. I suppose when they do get down to New York, people will think they're Puerto Ricans."

"With Dutch accents?" I laughed. Then a sudden thought hit me, and I said, "Isn't Couver a Dutch name? I mean, with the *van* removed for business reasons?"

"I think it is. Are you talking about Sam Couver?"

"Yeah. He's sort of Indian looking, too. You don't suppose Sam could be one of them, do you?"

"I don't think so. Why do you ask?"

"Just curious. I've been thinking about what Old Drukker said about Dutch land grants."

"You think Sam Couver might own land around Cybernia?"

"It sure would give him a motive. Bradshaw Spinner said something the other night about Cybernia growing, and unless some of these local farmers lose interest in their bones—"

"I see what you mean! Our tract is completely surrounded by land owned by the Elder Folk!"

Then she had to go and spoil it all by asking, "But what would Sam Couver's angle be, Ross? I mean, if he does own land, it's not as if he'd have any trouble selling it at a fantastic price. Ford and other big companies have been snapping up plots for as high as five thousand an acre. The Cybernia Corporation's not about to outbid anything like that!"

I thought a while and mused, "Maybe he's got a gold mine or something he doesn't want anyone to find out about?"

"Oh, Ross, in the Ramapos? They've never dug anything but iron ore and gravel around here. And not much of either, since the Ringwood mine closed down."

"Okay. Try it from another angle. Sam Couver's got bones buried in his woods, and he's out to protect them from the Cybernian octopus?"

"That's silly. The only way these people ever lose their land is through somewhat shady tax manipulations. I happen to know Sam Couver has an executive position on Wall Street. So he'd surely be able to keep up the taxes on all of the undeveloped land he could possibly hold title to."

"He's a Communist spy?"

We both laughed. Then Linda said, "You still think there's a human hand behind all these computer errors, don't you?"

"Has to be," I said. "Old Drukker shot my wild idea about Gordon lurking in the background, pushing buttons. But it has to be something like that. That thinkertinker's just too damned fresh to be doing it all on its own, even if it really works, which I sort of doubt."

"Come on," she replied. "Surely you don't expect me to believe I've had a crew of five feeding input to, well, a toy?"

"Maybe," I answered. "When you get right down to it, Linda, I can't see why the thinkertinker needs any of the stuff you've been feeding it. Matter of fact, I don't see why Cybernia needs such a complete system, even if it was completely kosher."

"That's simple," she said. "The whole town's automated."

"Sure, but automation and data processing are hardly the same thing. For instance, take those street lamps. Hell, lots of towns have had automatic street lighting for years. You only need a simple feedback switch and one or two photoelectric cells. There's no math connected with the fact that when it gets dark, it's time to turn on the street lamps! Same thing with the lawn sprinklers. A buried moisture sensor connected to your water valve and you're in business. It's no more complicated than a home thermo-stat."

"What about the snow removal and the way it monitors the power plant?"

"What about them? Simple feedback circuits, Linda. A thermostat to monitor; resistance coils to warm the pavement when the temperature drops below freezing. As for the power plant—they've had simple mechanical governors since the late 1700s. I could whip you up a fail-safe generator plant on a table cloth without a slide rule. Couple of governors, a bank of circuit breakers, and—"

"The circuit breakers failed in Ed Morton's house."

"So they were tampered with. You don't need a digital computer to tell you there's an overload in your power lines, for Pete's sake! Hell, I'll bet nine-tenths of the so-called automation in Cybernia is controlled by nothing more complicated than a few heat, light, and moisture monitors. Left to themselves, thermostats hardly ever go out of whack. Only, here in Cybernia some nut's hooked them all into a central control unit inside a mass of impenetrable junk!"

"So you intend to burn your way in?"

"Not until Monday. I don't want to damage the equipment any more than I have to. Some of it may actually be doing something, and I'd hate to blow anyone's fuses until I know just what I'm doing."

Linda thought for a time before she suggested, "Why can't we just disconnect the computer, Ross? Wouldn't that solve everything?"

"I suggested it to Spinner and the City Council. They had a fit. Seems they're afraid the whole town would blow up or something if I pulled the plug on their automated wet nurse."

"At least it wouldn't be able to kill anyone while it was turned off."

"I told them that, too. Spinner and Greenspan went along with me. But there are five men on the council, and they were outvoted. Couver said I was as bad as Ed Morton until I pointed out the machines *had* gotten Ed. That slowed Sam down a bit. But he still voted against turning the thing off."

"Well, another power failure would mess things up if it happened during the work week. Those new industries only relocated in Cybernia because we promised them cheap power and a relaxed atmosphere. A few hours down time would cost the data processing plant an awful amount of money, and if something wiped their tapes, they'd be out of business!"

"Yeah, Couver told me about that. Said the plant handles a lot of cost accounting for Wall Street brokerage houses. The dry type house prints a couple of monthly magazines, too. Missing a deadline would sink them."

"So what are you going to do, Ross?"

"I'm not sure," I replied. "I'll have to think of something, though, and fast. You know who's got to be next on that thing's list, don't you?"

She didn't answer.

She didn't have to.

We took the back roads into Cybernia. Linda knew a shortcut to the fire road I'd come in by the first time. The rain was coming down in sheets. I thought she'd have to stop when we reached the gate by the abandoned cemetery. But to my surprise the gate slid open as we approached. I asked Linda about it, and she said, "There are microwave sensors on the gates that recognize any car belonging to a Cybernia resident."

"How's it work—black box?"

"I'm not sure. They install this radio thing behind the grill, and when the sensors shoot a recognition signal at it—"

"Gotcha," I cut in. "Same thing as they used to use on fighter planes. I'll bet Gregory Gordon got a buy on war surplus at that!"

We drove along the fire road until we hit the hard top. Then Linda took a turn to the left, and I asked, "Where are we going? Isn't town the other way?"

"Doesn't matter," she explained. "This road rings the community and we can reach my place either way. I like it better by this route. There's a lovely view of the lake just up ahead and— Oh!"

I started to ask what the matter was. Then as I felt the tail end of the car sliding out from under us, I didn't have to. We were skidding wildly down a steep incline!

"Don't brake!" I yelled as Linda fought the wheel and the 'Vette went ape. We slid sideways and if there'd been any oncoming traffic, we'd have been dead. As it was, we were only in big trouble. The car had turned completely around by this time, and we were skidding backward down the hill as Linda gunned the engine and gasped something I didn't get.

She was good. Damned good. I don't think one driver out of a hundred could have handled that skid the way Linda did. She revved the rear wheels until our tail end was hanging out over space, and then as the vainly spinning rubber left the hard top, she cut the ignition and yelled, "Hang on! We're going over the edge!"

She was wrong, thank God. The rear wheels dropped off the road. The low-slung sports car bottomed on the shoulder, and for a million years we sort of teetered there. Then I said, "Don't lean back, for chrissake!" and eased the door open on my side. The weight shifted forward as I got out, and by the time I'd helped the girl from her seat, the 'Vette was more or less solidly planted with its front wheels on the hard top and its rear dangling thirty feet above someone's back yard!

I said, "That was close," and stepped out on the hard top. My left foot went out from under me, and I managed to gulp, "What the hell?" before I wound up flat on my back, staring up into the rain!

"Are you all right?" she yelled, starting over to help me. I said, "Stay off the road!" But it was too late. With a little gleep Linda fell beside me, and it was my turn to ask her if anything was broken. She sat up and stammered, "I don't think so." Then she ran her fingers over the pavement and gasped, "Ross, this road's covered with ice!"

I wondered what else was new.

"I can't understand it!" she insisted. "It can't be colder than sixty degrees, Ross. Whoever heard of ice in the middle of autumn?"

"These roads are supposed to be self-cleaning, remember?"

"Sure, in the winter time. But . . . Oh, my God!"

"The hot water tubing under the road is full of refriger-

ant," I finished for her. "Somebody just tried to slip us a cold foot. I wonder what the next move is, now that you didn't turn out to be the thinkertinker's idea of a woman driver?"

We didn't have long to wait. At Linda's suggestion I moved uphill along the shoulder of the road to warn oncoming cars about the freakish ice. I made it to the first bend when a police cruiser came along, its siren wailing. I waved frantically, and as it stopped, I said, "Don't drive any farther. The road's covered with ice."

The cop nearest me did a double take and said, "Ice? In September? What's the gag, mister?"

"Honest to God, the road's covered with a film of glare ice down there."

"Right. You, ah, want to get in the car, mister?"

I didn't. I said, "You're going to slide off the road if you drive any farther, officer. Miss Crawford's car is hanging off the next bend. We hit this patch of ice and—"

"Get in, mister. I'm asking real polite."

I said, "You're going to get us all killed." But I got in the back seat. Going off a mountain isn't *quite* as messy as taking a charge of number nine buck in the face.

The car started up and continued down the steep grade, as I braced myself for another sickening skid. But we didn't skid. We got to where Linda was standing in the rain beside her half-airborne 'Vette, and one of the cops said, "I'll be damned. Looks like she did do some skidding at that!"

He stopped, and the three of us got out. I felt the pavement gingerly with my sole, and of course, it was only wet. Linda caught the look I gave her and smiled weakly as she said, "The heat's on now! Who won this round, Ross?"

"Us," I said. "We're still alive."

Nobody believed us, of course.

The police were nice enough to let Linda off with a warning about driving too fast in the rain. But the men on the tow truck smirked openly as they hauled her car back out of the sky.

We didn't have much better luck with anyone else. Councilman Greenspan, who'd had his own misadventures with machinery, was decent enough to call the maintenance crew about the possibility of a refrigerant being shot through the road warming tubes. But he lost interest when they assured him the roads were heated by electric cables.

I said, "That's impossible, Greenspan. You can't pipe freon through heating elements."

"That's what they just said," replied the councilman.

Linda said, "Darn it, I skidded on ice! And then when Ross and I got out, we both fell down on ice!"

"So it was an inversion layer or something," said Greenspan. "The weather's freaky in these hills. Especially this time of the year."

Others were less kind.

The only one even willing to listen was Bradshaw Spinner. He called Linda as soon as he heard of our "accident" and, in the course of the conversation, invited us to dinner.

That gave me time to check out a few more leads.

Mostly false. Town Hall was a rat's nest of sensor cables and meaningless wires that gave me no reading on my magnetometer and could have been for anything. Try as I might, I couldn't make the one connection that might make the whole thing possible. I was vastly relieved to find there was no coax cable running from Gordon's electronic monster to the nearby data processing plant.

I explained the wild idea I'd had to Linda and Bradshaw Spinner over dinner. We were eating out on the terrace. The rain had let up, and in any case, Spinner had an ingenious rollout awning that sheltered the deck as soon as it sensed falling water. The whole house was practically a robot. Spinner lived alone, saying servants were nonpragmatecnical—his automated kitchen seemed capable of whipping up quite a meal. But to get back to our conversation, I was saying, "A tie-in between Gordon's thinkertinker and those multibanked logic circuits at the data processing plant would have been something to sweat about. But if they're not hooked up in any way, we can get back to Gordon's original psychosis."

"Why do you say he was psychotic?" asked Spinner with a frown.

I said, "Okay. Make it drunk then. I still say he laid the town's automation out with a bottle of booze in one hand and a left-handed monkey wrench in the other!"

"You still insist part of the snow-removal system has water-filled copper tubing then?"

"Has to have," I said. "Gordon bought an awful lot of secondhand and surplus equipment while he was stringing things together, you know. I'll bet you anything he got a buy on leftover slab heaters from Levittown. They'd just about finished the last of those Long Island cracker boxes when you started building Cybernia."

Spinner smiled modestly and said, "Actually *I* didn't build anything, Ross. Oh, the basic pragmatecnical concept was mine. But I'm a theoretician, not a technical expert on anything. Now to get back to your idea about the town's master computer hooking in to other data processing systems . . . What makes you think it hasn't, Ross?"

I said, "Because I can't trace the circuits. The thing in

the basement is wired all through the building itself. The check-writing machines in the comptroller's office, the card-index-sorting systems in a dozen others and, for all I know, the Coke machine in the lobby, have cables running down through the walls to whatever it is Gordon hid behind all that window dressing. But let's just hope it doesn't hook up with another computer system."

"What difference would it make if it was?" asked Linda.

"Give it a higher IQ," I replied. "There just can't be enough circuitry in that basement to handle the load someone wants us to think it's up to. But if I could find a connection to that massive system in the data processing plant—"

"There are other computers in Cybernia," Spinner cut in. "I think they have a Burroughs digital system in the tax accounting office at the shopping center, and the transistor plant has a Honeywell system, I believe."

"Might explain a few things if I could find the hidden wires," I said.

Bradshaw Spinner shook his head sadly and said, "My God, you're certainly myopic for a man who's supposed to be an expert, Ross. Maybe that's the trouble. Isn't an expert a man who learns more and more about less and less?"

"I guess so. But what are you getting at, Brad?"

"Why, it's right there before your eyes, son!" he insisted, waving a hand out over the view of the town below. "Can't you see how everything down there hooks together? My God, Ross. I told you, the whole town's *electric!*"

"You mean you think Gordon's thinkertinker is in communication with every other machine in town by way of its *power lines?*"

"Why not? They all run off the same electrical system, and it's alternating current. AC is off for half of every second. What's to stop another pulse from being sent during the microseconds the current's switched off?"

"Pretty far out," I mused. "You'd have to be sure your generators were running at a constant speed and using less voltage than a telephone line unless you wanted to burn

out a lot of toasters. One unexpected surge while you were communicating—"

"But Ross!" Linda suddenly gasped. "You're forgetting the computer under Town Hall *controls* the power plant!"

I thought out a diagram in my head, nodded, and said, "Yeah, it's possible. Just. But you'd never get an insurance underwriter to go along with the idea. One loose circuit breaker picking up your weaker pulses and . . . Oh, oh, the fire!"

"So it *could* have been computer error," said Bradshaw Spinner. It was a statement, not a question.

Linda asked, "What would that mean, Ross? What could a computer do if it was, as Brad suggests, hooked in to every piece of electrical equipment in town?"

"Kill us all if it was smart enough. The hell of it is, with those monstrous computer banks at its disposal, I'm not sure *how* smart it *could* be!"

"At least," offered Spinner, "it would explain how you were able to get an IBM answer to the Burroughs code. If there's a decoder built into Gordon's original creation and it's an instant communication with a Burroughs machine a couple of blocks away . . ."

"You think Gordon planned ahead? Knowing sooner or later you'd have other computers in town, he may have preprogrammed the damned thing to infiltrate all the basic systems by way of their outlet plugs?"

"It sounds like the sort of thing Gordon might do," answered the older man a trifle wistfully. He mused, "It would be sort of like leaving a part of you behind, wouldn't it? I mean, Gordon's dead, yet his memory lingers on!"

"That's creepy!" shivered Linda. "You make it sound like it's possible to leave an electronic ghost behind when you die!"

"Perhaps it is," said Bradshaw Spinner, soberly. "I know I rejected the traditional spooks before, but there *are* electronic ghosts. We've all seen them."

"We've all seen ghosts?" Linda said.

The old man nodded and said, "First, let us define a

ghost. Would the two of you agree that a ghost is the animated spectral image of a person who is dead? Is a phantom an insubstantial yet visible something that could pass for the dead person until you tried to reach out and touch it?"

"That's close to my idea of a ghost," I said, pretty sure by now that I knew what the old man had in mind. Linda hadn't caught on yet. She said, "You say we see these creatures?"

"See and hear them every night on the late late show."

"Oh, come on, you're talking about television!"

"An electronic device that sends an invisible signal through space and shows you Clark Gable, Gary Cooper, or even Jean Harlow, if you don't mind black and white. I'll bet neither of you young people were alive the day Jean Harlow died. Yet you both *know* her! You know how she walked and how she talked and how her breasts bounced when she ran down a flight of stairs in that slinky white dress. You know Jean Harlow and Laurel and Hardy and W. C. Fields and scores of other people who've been dead and buried for years. You can't touch them. They won't answer if you speak to them. But they're there, right before your eyes, as real as most of the people you know and even realer than your blurred memories of people you haven't seen for a few years. By any definition of the term, that's what I call a ghost!"

Linda started to object. Then her eyes grew misty, and she murmured, "I think you may have something, Brad. I *do* feel I know those people. I grew up with them. Yet as you say, many of them were dead before I was born. It's so odd I never thought of that before. Would you define, well, a recording as an electronic ghost?"

"Certainly. Glenn Miller died in the Second World War. But you can still dance to his music, can't you? For a few dollars you can listen to the immortal Bix on the trumpet, false notes and all. You can still hear Caruso the night he was out of voice. Or listen to those last speeches of Roosevelt and actually feel the bitterness of a dying man!"

"That's not what I meant," said Linda. "I was wondering if a man could somehow record his personality so that it lived on after he was dead."

"You mean the thinkertinker?" I asked.

Linda said, "Yes. Maybe we're being anthropomorphic. A person who didn't know how moving pictures worked could be confused by the images he saw and might think he was looking at a real person. Couldn't what's happening be something like that? A computer can be preprogrammed to do or say almost anything."

I smiled and asked, "Like 'Shut up and good night. I'm tired already'?"

"Why not? Given plenty of stored tape and a grotesque sense of humor. We did input a series of meaningless test questions the other night, Ross. Couldn't there be a relay that detects a certain mass of useless data and then simply tells the operator to go to hell?"

"Maybe," I said. "But Gordon died a couple of years ago. How could he have known you and I were going to be coming around that steep turn today? Or that Ed Morton wouldn't attend a party two years in the future?"

"It was just a thought," she said, sighing.

"So we're back where we started," said Bradshaw Spinner. "Where are you staying, now that Ed's in no position to put you up, Ross?"

"Motel, I guess. I stayed in Suffern, over on Route 17, last night."

"Nonsense. That's too far, Ross. You'll stay here with me until you've gotten to the bottom of this mess."

"Gee, Brad, I'm not sure I ought to."

"Why not? Linda can assure you I'm heterosexual—or used to be at any rate—and knowing her, you've no place better to sleep tonight. I've got scads of room, and as you might have guessed, I'm a garrulous old goat. I promise not to bore you too much for a few days at least. You *are* staying on after Sunday, aren't you?"

"I'm calling in sick Monday," I said. "I've a couple of weeks to play with, and I just won't get much sleep until I figure this mess out!"

"I doubt it could take anyone two weeks," said Spinner.

Linda said, "He's got some sort of torch to burn his way in with."

"Oxyacetalene?" asked Bradshaw Spinner.

"I'm still sweating the fine nozzle I ordered. Regular torch could wipe out a million storage bytes if it slopped into a square inch of printed circuitry. I'm out to figure the thing out, not wreck it!"

"I'm not too sure wrecking it isn't the pragmatecnic answer," said Spinner. "I can't get the others to go along with me, and my seat on the City Council's only honorary in any case. But dammit, that thing Gordon whipped together is starting to scare me, Ross. And I'm not a man who scares easy!"

"Let's see if we can unscramble its screwed up circuits," I replied. "We can always pull its plug if we have to."

"Can we?" asked Bradshaw Spinner.

"Come again?"

The old man turned to Linda and asked, "You've been running that thing for quite a while, Linda. Where's the master switch that turns it off?"

The girl thought a moment, and then she shook her head and said, "There isn't any! There's an off-and-on switch attached to each console. But the system works on its output all night, and dammit, I don't know how you turn it off."

"Not to worry," I said. "In a real pinch the whole building can be switched off. There's a main toggle by the circuit breakers in the maintenance room under the stairs."

"Might be a good idea to do just that," said Spinner, adding, "I mean right now and to hell with the City Council!"

"Negative," I said. "It's going to cause an awful lot of inconvenience if I kill that thing before I have to."

"When will you have to?" asked Spinner, staring soberly at me as he said, "It's already tried to kill the two of you. Do you intend to wait until it succeeds?"

As I may have mentioned, Linda Crawford had other charms aside from her ability as an input operator. So when she mentioned there was a dance that night in Sloatsburg, I didn't wait for old Bradshaw Spinner to ask her.

We got back around midnight, Sloatsburg being one of those wide spots on Route 17 that roll up the sidewalks at ten after Labor Day. Linda said the place swung during the summer. But you couldn't prove it by me. If I'd been with anyone else, the evening might have been a drag. As it was, I had to settle for a goodnight kiss at her door.

We'd used my car this time, it having been fitted with one of those recognition black boxes, free of charge, in the underground garage. As I was driving back up to Bradshaw Spinner's place, I wondered half-seriously whether the thing had been installed by elves.

Apparently there were plenty of service personnel working for the Cybernia Corporation. But you never seemed to see them. Between the automation and the spooky way things were bolted to your car while your back was turned, you got the feeling you were living over an underground city of H. G. Wells' Morlocks. I had a sudden picture of all these gray little men working massive machinery in a dimly lit cavern under Cybernia. I put it aside with a grimace. I was having enough trouble with a

thinkertinker that threatened repair men with bodily harm!

Brandshaw Spinner was still up when I arrived. He'd run down some since dinner time. But he still insisted on a tour of the house and another lecture on pragmatecnics before he'd let me turn in.

The house, at least, was interesting. The old man certainly had time on his hands up there on top of the ridge. He kept a dozen hobbies going at once in that massive pile. Most of it was over my head or beyond my attention span. I mean, sure, I can see the advantages of a three-wheeled electric car, and I'll admit that burning microscopic holes through a razor blade with a laser beam is kind of interesting. But at one o'clock in the morning?

The astronomical observatory was a complete bust. The sky was still overcast, and Spinner's big refracting telescope just sat there, looking helpless. I mentioned it would make a dandy toy for a Peeping Tom. But the old man shot me a disgusted look and said something about bearings and a horizon line. I swung the tube as low as it would go, and all I could see was a lot of nothing across the valley.

"You could see New York if that ridge over there were a few feet lower," Spinner observed. I cranked the tube back to where I'd found it. As we were leaving the observatory, I casually mentioned that the hunting ought to be pretty good with all that second growth.

"I wouldn't advise hunting in the Ramapos," said Spinner, soberly. "Some of these hills can be rather dangerous to wander about in."

"Why? You mean those spooky Jackson Whites?"

"Oh, they're harmless enough. But there are copperheads and diamondbacks among those rocks. And you have to watch for abandoned mine shafts. Some of them are badly overgrown with brush, and a man can fall a hundred feet before he knows what's happened. After that, of course, he won't know much of anything."

I said, "Linda was telling me there were old mines in these hills. Have you found any in this valley?"

"No," said Bradshaw Spinner. "Not that we wanted to, of course."

"You mean, nobody's ever really searched for one?" I asked. "I'm not talking about an entrance. I mean a possible tunnel running under Cybernia from somewhere off in the surrounding woods."

Spinner stepped to a nearby window and gazed thoughtfully down at the winking lights in the valley before he said, "Doubt it. The water table should be pretty high with the reservoir storing up all that rain. Besides, there'd be some sort of settlement, or the ruins of one, if there'd ever been anything like a mine in the valley. I'm sure we didn't uncover any substantial ruins while the bulldozers were grading down there."

"What about that country churchyard just outside your property line? Must be thirty or forty graves over there. It'd take a good-sized village to supply all those markers."

"Or a long time," said Spinner. "I know the place you're talking about. It's on the Donner tract. We've been trying to buy that land for years."

"They won't sell," I said. "They got bones buried there. But seriously, wasn't there ever a town over there?"

"Not that I know of. We can check it out with the county clerk. But before the thirties folks around here didn't keep many records."

"Who owns the land down the other way, behind your property?"

"State game preserve. That's why I bought this plot. The next hollow over is posted. Nobody ever comes up on me from behind except an occasional game warden. One of them's a Jackson White who claims he can remember a grandmother who spoke Lenape. Says it was related to Delaware. I've never quite figured out how he knows that. The man has enough trouble with English."

I nodded impatiently and said, "Then unless you can buy the Donner family out, Cybernia can't possibly expand?"

"Oh, we've land enough for the next ten or twenty years," he answered. "By that time I'm sure values will

have changed in these hills. Not that I'll be around to see it, of course."

He'd said it simply, without bitterness. But it did give me an uneasy thrill to realize that to a man Spinner's age, twenty years did seem too far into the Big Dark to worry about.

As if he'd read my thoughts, Spinner said, "It's Mars I'm worried most about, if you want to know the truth."

"You worry about Mars, Brad?"

"What's up there," he said. "I've been waiting for them to land on the moon since Goddard and I were trying to interest anyone who'd listen, back in the thirties . . . we got to the moon finally, and my curiosity's been satisfied about it. But unless those fat heads in Washington get the lead out, I'm just never going to know what those markings we used to think were canals really are!"

"Can you see the canals of Mars with that telescope of yours?"

"Oh, hell no. I just tinker around with the thing. This close to the lights of New York, I'm lucky to make out the rings of Saturn or the Sea of Tranquillity. I looked for them the night they landed, you know. But naturally, I didn't see anything."

He was almost like a kid, I thought. Pushing eighty and still filled with the childlike wonder of the universe around him! I thought back over all the things I'd heard and read about Bradshaw Spinner and suddenly realized why he'd been such an odd combination of genius and loser. The man had a steel-trap mind. But no attention span worthy of his fantastic imagination. He played with ideas of space ships and mile-high buildings the way bright adolescents play with ham radios and erector sets. Bradshaw Spinner was capable of dreaming up instant pragmatecnical solutions to the world's many ills. But he left the details to the technical people. As a technical people, I wasn't sure whether I resented or envied him. Leonardo had had a mind like his. A mind capable of dreaming up submarines and flying machines or gear trains too complicated for the primitive engineers of his day to understand. Yet that same mind had neglected to mix paint well enough to stay

on a wall more than a few months. *The Last Supper* had started to peel as fast as he'd painted it. Men like Leonardo and Bradshaw Spinner needed men like me to mix their paints and figure the wind stress on a mile-high building.

But yeah, I was jealous. Jealous and a little wistful about a few might-have-beens, too. I mean, my God, can you imagine what a man could do if he had the imagination of a Leonardo and the stick-to-itness of an Ehrlich or an Edison? Hell, with Spinner's ability to grasp the nitty-gritty and my ability to trace a circuit, *I* could probably invent a computer complex enough to have feelings and self-[illegible]

That was a thought.

As he lead the way into another part of the house, I asked, casually, "Did you work very closely with Gordon, Brad?"

"*He* worked for *me*," Spinner corrected. "I told you Gordon had a drinking problem, didn't I? Actually I don't imagine anyone else could have gotten much out of Gordon. But I managed to nurse him through his worst spells, and when he was halfway sober, Gordon was one hell of a technician. Do you know he used to make radios, to give away to the neighborhood kids, out of a silicate-coated razor blade, a safety pin, and a coffee can? I never could figure out how he made the damned thing work!"

"I know the circuit," I said. "It's a basic crystal-set layout."

"My God, can *you* make a radio out of an old razor blade?"

"New blade works better," I laughed. "Not that any of them are more than primitive toys."

"He built robots, too," Spinner mused. "Nothing as complicated as you see in a science fiction movie, mind you. But just the same, they were robots. One of them was a little three-wheeled cart that fed itself. It hunted along the baseboard until it found an electric outlet, and then it plugged itself in, charged up its batteries, and wandered around until it got, well, hungry again."

"The robot lawn mower seems to have been a bust," I said.

"I suppose he'd have been better off with the robot woman at that," sighed Spinner. "I've always felt a little guilty about talking poor old Gordon out of that one. It sounded a little sick. But at least it wouldn't have chopped him up like hamburger!"

"What was that about a robot woman?" I asked.

Spinner said, "Gordon had trouble with women all his life. He wasn't too pretty, even sober. So one day he came up with this harebrained scheme to build the perfect sleeping companion."

I said, "Glugh. I've seen those rubber dollies for lonesome boys. You can buy one with a clit for sixty bucks in New York."

"Gordon wasn't talking about a rubber dummy," Spinner insisted. "He intended to install pneumatic muscles over a skeleton of steel tubing and, well, program it to give him a good lay!"

"He was serious?"

"Who's to say what a drunk's serious about? It probably would have worked, you know. Gordon reduced the sex act to less than a hundred basic motions, and he had a beautiful window mannequin recast in that novelty plastic they make those squishy toy lizards out of—"

"I get the picture!" I cut in. "But you still haven't answered my first question. I asked how much of the Cybernia computer system was your idea and how much Gordon thought up on his own."

"The concept was mine," said Spinner. "But once I told Gordon what I wanted the damned thing to do, I have no idea how he made it work. Oh, I've got a little knowledge of cybernetics. I've read Von Nieuman on game theory. I've even got a Marchand desk calculator down in the work shop. But I don't understand exactly what makes it tick. I just punch the keys, and it tells me where I figured wrong on the slip stick. I only use it when my slide rule fails me. Generation gap, I guess. The other junk down there is completely over my head."

"Other junk?"

"Some of the stuff Gregory Gordon was working on when he died. He automated this house for me, you know.

It'd be even more impressive if only he'd stayed away from moving machinery when he'd been drinking!"

"You mind if I have a look?"

"Of course not. It's right down this way. Watch the steps, though. I've been meaning to straighten up down there one of these days. The living quarters more or less clean themselves. But Gordon died before we were finished."

We went down to a lower level I hadn't seen before. One wall was solid glass, overlooking the valley. The other was carved out of the ridge, so I'm not sure whether you would call it a bottom floor or a basement. Whatever it was, Spinner had been right about it being a mess.

The concrete retaining wall was lined with work benches and a complete work shop. There was a turret lathe, a drill press, and an industrial die cutter you could have built a locomotive with, if there'd been room. Room was somewhat a problem down there. The whole space, running the length of the house above, was cluttered with expensive junk. Bits and pieces of half-assembled Rube Goldbergia lay like abandoned toys amid an inch-deep carpet of nuts, bolts, lengths of wire, greasy dust, and what looked like metallic belly button lint. A space had been more or less swept clear near the glass wall. It was occupied by a king-sized desk and an even larger drawing board. I saw, from the position of the swivel chair by the desk, that Bradshaw Spinner worked or doodled facing the view.

There was a drafting machine pinning a sheaf of blue prints to the drawing board. The desk was covered with a mishmash of papers, pencil stubs, an electric typewriter, and the Marchand desk calculator he'd mentioned up-stairs.

Spinner kicked a loose coil of BX wire out of the way and said, "One of these days I've really got to get this place organized."

"What are you working on at the moment?" I asked casually.

"Air pollution," he replied. "Actually it's not an invention at all. I've been writing letters to the President's Advi-

sory Commission on Environmental Improvement. They have to answer politely because I made the cover of *Time*. But actually, I don't think those boondoggle political hacks have any idea what I'm talking about. They keep giving away tax dollars for research, and all the time the pragmatecnical solution is right before their myopic eyes! All this shit about emission control makes me sick. I could cut automobile emissions in half with a stroke of the pen, if I were running things in Washington!"

"Electric cars?" I said.

"Not yet," he replied. "We need a breakthrough in batteries or a cheaper way to make fuel cells. Steam's not the answer either. The answer's been there all the time. Ever since some damned fool in Detroit started putting aircraft engines in family cars as an advertising gimmick."

"You mean most cars are overpowered?"

"Well, of course they're overpowered. Do you know what the V-8 engine was designed to do in the first place? It was designed to rotate the propeller of a World War One Spad! Jesus H. Christ, the Red Baron only needed a hundred and twenty horses to tear ass across the sky in Tony Fokker's silly three-winged kite! But do they know that in Detroit? Hell no! They use four or five hundred horses and two bucket seats so that some young stud can make vroom-vroom with a single passenger, and then they worry about air pollution!"

"You're suggesting smaller engines then?"

"Well, of course I'm suggesting smaller engines. But V-8 seems to be a magic word. I mean, hell, a four-cylinder mill of forty horse power can haul six passengers at a hundred miles an hour, and who in hell wants to go faster than that on the poorly designed roads we have in this country?"

"You're doing good to go forty in today's traffic."

"That's what I've been telling those idiots in Washington. We've got all those oversized engines, idling bumper to bumper and belching half their fuel out their tail pipes, and they wonder why we have smog! If there were a limitation on horsepower, we could have the same number of

cars, hauling the same number of people, and have the smog problem cut in half!"

"You know," I grinned, "I think you've got something! But wouldn't there be a howl about government regulation? I mean, the right to bear arms and drive the biggest car on the block are sort of sacred to the unwashed. Besides, you'd still have half the smog, wouldn't you?"

"Half the smog is better than all of it!" snorted Bradshaw Spinner. "You eat an apple a bite at a time, son. There's no instant solution to any problem. But while we're waiting for a cheap fuel cell, we still have to breathe. As to sacred rights—that's a lot of shit, too. You can't have civilization without giving up a few freedoms. The first two hominoids who decided it was logical to hunt together had to give up the right to eat one another. The most primitive tribe agrees that murder, rape, and theft within the food-gathering band is a no-no."

I nodded and said, "Soon as they start to grow food, they have to give up the right to pick any berries they please, eh?"

"Of course. Each advance means another self or government control over the individual's actions. You know why it's not safe to walk the streets in any of our major cities today? It's because of that freedom and liberty nonsense they teach children in school. Children should not be allowed to hear about the Minute Men or even Robin Hood until they've learned not to bully and steal from their classmates. You tell an undisciplined lout he's got freedom, and he thinks that means he can drive his motorcycle through a crowded supermarket. There's one hell of a lot of mileage between fascism and total anarchy. But most Americans can't seem to find a comfortable area between them. They either demand the immediate execution of some poor subnormal with a drug problem or sob that you're taking away their freedom of speech if they're not allowed to shout 'Fuck you' in church!"

I said, "I'd draw the line at shouting 'Fire' in a crowded theater."

"Imperialist racist pig!" laughed Bradshaw Spinner.

"How'd racism get into this?" I asked.

"Part of the anarchist creed," he said. "Thanks to that nut, Hitler, we've been conditioned to treat minorities as sacred cows. Since everyone belongs to some damned minority, anyone who happens to be robbing a candy store can shout he's being discriminated against when they take his gun away."

"Not me," I sighed. "Us WASPs have to work for a living."

"You're not a WASP. You're a Celt. And what makes you think you're not a minority? You're a white, middle-class, electronic data processing technician. Don't you realize you're outnumbered by Bulgarians in this country?"

I started to protest. Then I laughed and said, "I see what you mean. But somehow I can't see myself telling the IRS they're picking on Scotch Presbyterians when they make me file my tax returns."

"Why not try it?" he suggested. "Couldn't you get the civil liberties people to back you if you pleaded the Fifth Amendment on April fifteenth?"

"I haven't the balls to try!"

"That's because you're civilized. End of lecture."

I chuckled somewhat uncertainly and turned away from the desk. My eyes picked a familiar object out of the litter under a work bench and I said, "Isn't that the rear panel of a 7094 input console?"

Bradshaw Spinner followed my gaze and said, "Oh, that? I think it's something left over from what Greg Gordon was working on when he died. There's some sort of printed circuitry on the other side."

"He needed an IBM 7094 to program a mechanical doll? They predict presidential elections with those big rigs, Brad!"

"Maybe it's left over from the computer he built in Town Hall then."

"He used 360 M 75 components down there . . ." I began. Then my voice trailed off.

Spinner finished for me by saying, "Greg sort of threw together anything handy. I know it cost a hell of a lot. Had

a little set to with the other directors when we started getting the bills for all the junk Gordon ordered."

"The bills were filed?"

"Of course. Every dime we've handled in Cybernia is on punched cards in the comptroller's office."

"But that means I'd have to order a readout from the data storage banks to get the information!"

"So?"

"So, apparently Gordon's thinkertinker is willing to commit murder to keep me from investigating its circuits. What makes you think that if I asked it to give me a complete record of its purchase orders, it would tell me the truth?"

The old man thought a moment before he said, "I see what you mean! I doubt Gordon kept any other records. I had to fight with him for the sales slips, and even then I'm not sure we filed them all. Gordon used to pick things up in used parts shops, surplus stores, or even junk yards. I don't think he paid for some of the stuff he lugged home with him!"

"Where'd he work—here?"

"Part of the time. He had his own workshop at home. He was living just down the hill when he had his accident. Christ, what a mess of junk he left in his garage!"

"Think any of it's still there?"

"Doubt it. The Greenspans moved in after Greg was killed. Sarah Greenspan's one of those *Better Homes and Gardens* nuts. She had the place fumigated, hung artsy-craftsy knickknacks, and planted lemon-scented geraniums all over the place. She gets a little uptight when you mention Gordon to her, by the way. They found his working drawing for the mechanical woman, and she seemed to feel this made him a dirty old man as well as a drunk."

"What about his other working drawings? You have them?"

"A few. But Sarah Greenspan burned the ones she found in the house when they moved in. I was terribly upset at the time. God knows what that silly woman destroyed without understanding that Gordon was a genius. I

don't mind admitting that half the inventions I'm collecting royalties on today were refined to pragmatecnical functionality by that poor, lovable drunk!"

"You found him lovable?"

"From a purely heterosexual point of view. Greg was more than an assistant, Ross. Sometimes he made me so mad I could spit. But we were good friends. It was a terrible shock to find him chopped up that way!"

"That's right. You were the first one to see the body, weren't you?"

"No. The police arrived ahead of me. Neighbors heard him screaming and called the police. The berserk lawn mower was still hacking at him when they arrived and—you'll never believe this—one of them *shot* it!"

"A cop shot the lawn mower?"

"Well, what would you have done in his place? They couldn't find a cut-off switch, and one of them told me later that it seemed almost, well, *alive* at the time. He said he was afraid it would go for him, like a mad dog!"

"Your lovable Gordon sure built some unlovable machinery!"

"Anthropomorphism," Spinner said. "A cranky machine *does* seem to be acting nasty on purpose sometimes. I confess I feel that way myself when I can't get something to work right. A balky car can take on the exact personality we associate with an Army mule!"

"I know what you mean," I said. "I've had a small part jump out of place over and over again, like it was a damned insect with a life of its own. I mean, I know it's just a little piece of metal with no moving parts, let alone a nervous system. But sometimes you get this *feeling* . . ."

"It's quite simple," said Bradshaw Spinner. "We learn at a very early age that when someone doesn't like you, they hit you, throw sand in your face, or bite you on the leg. Later, when we discover that lightning can kill you and that cars can run over you, it's hard not to take it personally. They've gotten quite a few religions out of the feeling so far."

"What about the computer? You still think we're just psyching ourselves? That snotty remark it made the other

night could have been preprogrammed, you know. Gordon may have set it to refuse to answer more than a certain number of test questions and—"

"He certainly never programmed it to freeze the road under Linda's car this afternoon!" the old man cut in. "Gordon may have been a dirty old man, but he wasn't that dirty! Besides, he'd have had no way of knowing that two years after he was dead, a pretty girl would be driving over a certain stretch of road on a rainy day!"

"So there has to be thought—as we understand the term—behind these attacks."

"If they *are* attacks," said Spinner. "I'm not convinced they're not a series of unrelated accidents yet. Oh, I know they *seem* connected, and it doesn't seem logical that fatal or near fatal computer errors could pile up that way. But it doesn't seem logical that a slot machine could jackpot twelve times in a row, either. Yet I've seen it happen. Out in Vegas five years ago. I threw a quarter in just for the hell of it and made twelve jackpots: bang, bang, bang. Everyone around us said it was impossible."

"Us?" I frowned.

"Oh, Gordon was with me at the time."

It figured.

Sunday dawned sunny and warm. But the woods were still dripping, and Linda's idea of a picnic seemed a little soggy. So we settled on a fishing expedition.

Actually we didn't do so hot. We parked down by the boat house, and I rented a flat-bottom skiff. Linda handled our two poles as I rowed. But the fish didn't seem to feel like biting.

"It's the high water," she explained as I rowed us along the south edge of the reservoir. I didn't argue, even though the fishing's usually good after a rain. I was taking it easy, the steady stroke of the oars just enough exercise to make a man feel good and the view up Linda's skirt enough to make him horny. It was one of those lazy Indian summer days when you want to stop the calendar and say, "Here, God. You've got the thermostat just right for once. So why can't we just leave it alone, huh?"

Linda said, "Oh, I've got a nibble!" But then, a moment later she added, "Nasty little silversides! They steal the bait every time!"

"Not to worry," I said. "We've got a bucketful, and I'm not sure what we'd do with a pickerel if we caught one."

"They're good eating," she insisted. Things were looking up. If she intended to cook the fish we caught, that meant we'd wind up in her pad and—

"Ross," she said. You're drifting into the boys' lines!"

I glanced over my shoulder and saw we were bearing down on the bobbing floats two young boys had cast hopefully from the bank. I swung our bow away from the bank. As we passed well away from their lines, one of the boys made a peace sign and called, "Thank you, sir!"

"Nice kids." I smiled, not knowing at the time how nice indeed they were going to be in the near future. They were about eight or ten. One of them wore a Cub Scout shirt. They didn't seem to be catching anything, either.

"It's getting warm," I said, half to myself.

But Linda suddenly shivered and asked, "Ross, have you ever had a feeling that someone is watching you?"

I looked around at the valley walls on either side and said, "I imagine all sorts of people are watching us, honey. We're in the middle of the lake, and you're a very pretty girl."

"I'm not talking about someone *looking* at us, Ross," she insisted. "I have this feeling we're being *watched*."

"It's not the same thing?"

"No. It's malignant. I feel like a mouse that just *knows* the cat's staring down with those unwinking yellow eyes and—"

"Hey, what's with the phobias?" I laughed. Then I looked around uneasily and said, "Damn! Now you've got me doing it! Funny, I haven't felt like this since Nam."

"Like you're being watched?"

"Like I'm set up for a sniper!" I amended. "I was a tank commander over in Nam. It used to make me sort of goosey, crossing a paddy with my dumb head sticking out of the turret and God knows how many VC watching from the tree line. Haven't thought about things like that for a while. But now that you've started my paranoia relays, I can't help thinking what a perfect target we make out here in this slow-moving skiff!"

"I feel eyes, Ross! You remember that bank of electric eyes you found up in the cupola yesterday?"

"I told you, photoelectric eyes don't *see*, honey!"

"Then why are they called electric eyes?"

"Because people are dumb. The selium merely converts a flow of current, depending on the amount of light it's exposed to. It picks up light photons. Not images."

"Town Hall is right over there," Linda said. "And anyone, or any . . . *thing* hiding in that cupola, would have a perfect view of us!"

"For God's sake, didn't they teach you anything about electronics while they were turning you into a keypunch operator?"

"They taught me to punch keys," she said sheepishly. "Oh, we got some classroom theory, but I'm afraid most of it went in one eye and out the other. Those damned diagrams are so complicated!"

"Well, take my word for it. Electric eyes are not eyes."

"So what's watching us?"

"You still feel we're being watched?"

"I don't *feel* it. I *know* it. And if you say one word about feminine intuition—"

"Female chauvinist pig!" I laughed.

She threw back, "If there's one thing that turns me off, it's one of you faggy Men's Lib types!" Then we both laughed.

I looked over my left shoulder to see where we were and then I said, "We seem to be running out of lake. Look, if being out here on the water bugs you that much, why don't I just run you ashore? I can row back to the boathouse in a few minutes, and you can meet me there."

"Oh, Ross, I'm not that big a spoilsport!"

"What spoilsport? We're not catching anything anyway, and you're getting spooked. I mean, what the hell, it's a nice warm Sunday afternoon, and we're in the middle of the Ramapos. There must be dozens of other places to go, where electric eyes can't watch us."

"Well," she said, "we could drive over into the Seven Lakes or see what's on top of Bear Mountain. I've been meaning to investigate that big tower up there ever since I took this job."

"I'll run you ashore."

"Don't be silly. Why don't we just circle the lake this

one time and have a drinky-poo at the mall while we make up our minds?"

"Right on," I said, digging the port oar in to turn.

Not much happened. Oh, the boat turned. But we didn't seem to be moving! I swung the stern completely around and, facing the dam at the far end of the lake, started to put my back into it. But no matter how hard I rowed, we didn't seem to be heading back to the boat house. I rested on the oars a moment and saw we were drifting toward the dam. Fast.

I muttered, "What the hell?" and started rowing as hard as I could. The skiff was moving faster now. Moving the wrong way. Linda started to ask what was wrong. Then she turned to face back over the stern and shout, "Oh, my God! The floodgates have opened! They're not supposed to do that with people on the lake!"

"Yeah," I grunted, starting to sweat as I dug the oars in and fought the current. I knew I shouldn't ask. But I grunted, "How high is the spillway on the other side of those gates?"

"About four or five stories! Can't you swing in to the bank?"

"I'm trying to," I answered. The water was moving faster now. On shore someone was shouting. I didn't answer. I had the boat at a forty-five-degree angle to the current, and I was rowing as if my life depended on it. Mainly because it did!

"It's gaining on us!" Linda said, quite calmly, considering. Then, her first moment of panic having apparently been replaced by that ice-cold calm a woman only attains in a real emergency, she asked, "What can I do to help, Ross?"

"Shift your ass and trim the boat," I grunted.

She slid to the dead center of the boat, leaned forward, and asked, "That better?"

"Some," I said. "But we're in big trouble, kid. How far's the bank from my back?"

"About a hundred feet. Wouldn't we do better swimming for it?"

"Negative. No swimmer born of woman is going to

buck this current better than a pair of oars, and I'm not doing so hot."

"I think you're gaining on it."

She was full of crap. I could see we were being sucked closer and closer to the floodgates, and I was running out of steam. My breath was coming in raw burning gasps, and I knew I couldn't row this hard much longer. On the other hand, I knew I couldn't stop! A clump of water weed zipped past at a frightening speed and, even as I watched, vanished over the lip of the dam. I knew from the surrounding hills that this impounded lake was deep, with steep slopes and hardly any shallows. Somehow, I had to get us within a few feet of the bank before we dared to jump for it. The help was unexpected when it came.

Over my shoulder I heard a high-pitched voice yelling, "Hey, mister, you're going over the dam!"

I wondered what else was new.

But Linda shouted, "Can you cast this far with your fishing lines, boys?"

"We'll try, lady!"

A few moments later something flopped in the water near my right oar. It belonged to one of the kids we'd seen before. He'd made a damned fine cast for a kid—or anyone else!

I tried to snag the line with the oar. But the moment I stopped rowing, we lost ground, or rather, water. I swore and dug in, fighting just to keep us even with the current as Linda said, "Let *me* worry about the lines, Ross. You just row!"

Something hit the starboard gunwale with a hollow thunk. Linda, moving like a cat, lunged forward, landing with her head in my lap and holding the leader of a fishing line in both hands!

"Keep rowing!" she gasped, crawling over the seat between my right hip and starboard oarlock. I didn't have to be told. I'd seen just enough of the line to know it was that green kite string you get in a kid's cheap fishing kit. I didn't know its tensile strength, but it couldn't have been much.

Linda was up in the bow now. I heard her calling,

"That's it, boys. Keep walking back like that. Don't try to reel and, for heaven's sake, don't let it go slack!"

I saw we were moving toward shore. I risked a quick glance over one shoulder and saw the two kids were playing us with the skill a kite-flying whizz only attains after he's broken a dozen strings. A man was running towards the boys, and Linda shouted, "Leave them alone, please! They're doing just fine!"

And then, quite simply, the water stopped running over the spillway. The boys staggered backward, almost falling, as the skiff literally leaped toward shore. Leaning all my hundred and sixty pounds and a couple of prayers into both oars may have had something to do with it.

I didn't stop rowing or praying until the bow of the skiff had run around and Linda had leaped ashore, holding the painter. She hauled the skiff a third of the way out with surprising strength for a woman. Then I was out and helping her up the steep, slippery bank.

"It gave up!" she whispered. "It saw those boys were going to save us, and it just gave up!"

The man who'd run over had a hand on the Cub Scout's shoulder as we approached. He grinned and said, "Hi! That sure was close, wasn't it? I thought you were going over the spillway for sure!"

"So did we," I said. Then I smiled at the boys and said, "Thanks, guys."

"Chuck here is my son," the man said.

I said, "Well, Chuck and this other boy just saved our lives." I turned to the other kid and added, "I don't know how we ought to deal with you two juvenile delinquents. You ought to get a medal. Will you settle for all the soda you can drink?"

"I'd rather have the medal," said the off-duty Cub Scout. "I've been trying and trying for a silver arrowhead. But the troop leader keeps giving them to his own kid."

"That Larry Wilson stinks," agreed his companion.

I looked at Chuck's father and asked, "Okay with you, Mr. . . .?"

"Howard," he said. "I'm Tom Howard. We live in that salt box over there. I guess it's okay for him to have one

malt. Maybe I'd better call Roger's mother and tell her where the boys are. I'm supposed to be keeping an eye on both of these cow hands. You'll be over on the mall?"

"At the malt shop," Linda said.

Howard walked back to his house as Linda and I took the boys over to the shopping mall. I waited until all four of us were seated under the awning in front of the mall and excused myself, saying, "I'll be right back. Got to get something out of my car."

By the time I rejoined them, the kids had about finished their sodas. Linda smiled up at me and asked, "What took you so long?"

"Had to rummage," I explained. "I was sure I had these in the car. They came in the mail the other day, and I threw them in the glove compartment."

I put the two plastic cases on the table and said, "Here, guys. It's the best I can do on such short notice. I don't have my life saved every day, you know."

The one called Roger opened his case with a puzzled frown and then he grinned, "Oh, wow! A real medal!"

Linda shot me a puzzled look and I said, "Chuck gets the Arvin Palm of Gallantry, on account of it was his fishing pole. Roger here gets the Bronze Star. I would have had the Silver Star, but our troop leader saved all the Silver Stars for his own kid. First lieutenants stink."

Roger took his medal out and admired it, asking, "Wow! Do we get to *wear* these, mister?"

"Sure, why not? You earned them, didn't you?"

As the two boys scampered off with their new toys, Linda murmured, "That was very sweet of you, Ross."

"Come on, I had no use for those tinkle-pretties."

"Just the same, I think it was sweet."

I shrugged uncomfortably and said, "We'd better start thinking about ourselves again. Needless to say, those flood gates back there are under the control of our friendly neighborhood computer system?"

"Needless to say," she agreed. "I *told* you it was watching us!"

"Somebody was," I amended. "Somebody who shut the floodgates again as soon as they saw we weren't going over

the dam. One thing you've got to say for whoever's trying to kill us: they certainly are efficient. Didn't waste a gallon of water they didn't need to!"

"The reservoir feeds the generator plant," said Linda.

"Meaning?"

"Meaning it's not wasting electricity, either."

The computer error that nearly sent us over the spillway was a little much for the City Council. This time there were no votes against shutting down the computer system until we could figure out why it seemed to want to kill people.

The meeting was at Councilman Couver's place near the Town Hall. Nobody felt too comfortable about the usual council chambers these days. It wasn't too crowded on Couver's terrace, and his wife served very nice onion dip with the drinks. Aside from the city councilmen, Linda and me, we'd been joined by the police captain I'd met the night Morton was killed and a deputy from the county sheriff's office. His name was Romero, and needless to say, he was not a Jackson White.

I guess we all felt a little smug as we worked on the onion dip and kicked ideas around. I'd assured them the town would hardly fall apart with the computer shut down for a few days. Street lamps can be turned on and off by human hands, after all, and they'd manage without the

snazzy security system for a few days if people would only learn to lock their doors again.

Then one of the men from the maintenance crew arrived at the meeting with a puzzled frown on his weathered face to say, "It won't turn off."

"Didn't you throw the main switch?" asked Couver, who, since the death of Morton, was acting as temporary city manager.

The maintenance man nodded and said, "Threw the circuit breakers, too, Mr. Couver. But the lights are still working, and that thing down in the cellar keeps going pockatapockata!"

"That's impossible," said Bradshaw Spinner.

"Storage batteries?" I mused.

Spinner said, "That's impossible, too. You'd need a barn full of batteries to run that mess on a hundred and ten volts."

Sam Couver licked his lips and asked, "Can't we cut the power lines or something?"

The maintenance man shrugged and said, "I can cut the main line from the power plant if you want me to, Mr. Couver. Only I don't know what difference it'll make. There's no juice coming through it now, unless my induction meter's busted."

Romero, the deputy, said, "Let me get this straight. You people have some sort of mechanical monster here that kills people, and you can't shut it off?"

"Just like in the horror movies," I answered wryly.

Romero shook his head and said, "Hell, why don't we just blow the thing up? I could get some dynamite over at the county seat and—"

"I think that's what we're supposed to do," I objected.

Romero blinked at me and said, "Your Frankenstein computer wants to commit suicide?"

"I'm not sure," I conceded. "But wouldn't we be expected to react this way? You'd think it had been programmed to call out the National Guard, for God's sake. You've seen those flicks with the soldiers all around the berserk robot from outer space. There's usually a field

grade officer saying something like, "Call in the flame-throwing tanks!' "

"Jets, too," murmured Linda. "They know they're in trouble when the jets drop the Bomb. When the smoke clears, the nearest extra shouts, 'It's getting *bigger*, Colonel!' "

"Come on!" laughed Romero, a trifle uneasily. "You're not suggesting that thing in Town Hall can stand up to flame-throwing tanks and atom bombs!"

"I could reduce it to hash with a nine-pound sledge," I replied. "That's probably just what someone wants me to do."

There was a moment of silence as my words were digested. Then Bradshaw Spinner said, "I see what you mean, Ross. Ed Morton sent for you because you're an EDP expert who knows how to take a computer apart without losing any nuts and bolts. But Ed was killed for sicking you on the system. Now apparently the system wants to either kill you or goad you into wrecking it so badly we'll never in a million years be able to get to the bottom of this mess!"

Romero had a quick brain for a country deputy. He said, "As I see it then, you guys don't really think it's the computer doing all this stuff. You think some human being's trying to hide something, right? But what could they be trying to hide?"

"Records," I suggested. "Cybernia's bookkeeping is completely automated. The information's stored on punched cards or electromagnetic tape. Someone's trying to keep us from getting a readout on something the computer recorded. If we knew when or what, we'd know who our murderer was."

"Somebody dipping into the till?" asked Conver. "Our financial records have been audited by IRS and Trenton. If anyone had ever stolen more than a few thousand dollars, we'd have caught it without a computer."

"You can nickle and dime an awful lot of money out of any set of books," I objected. "I remember a case I worked on for a bank down on Wall Street. Took me the

better part of a week before I found how one of their key-punch operators was robbing the bank. He'd programmed the computer to credit all the loose change from every check that went through the machine to an account he held in his wife's name. A check would come in for, say, five hundred and forty-seven dollars and thirty-seven cents. The thinkertinker put all but the thirty-seven cents in the right account. Naturally nobody ever worried about the few cents' shortage here and there. The customers assumed it was a service charge, if they even noticed their account was a few cents short of what they had on their books."

"Hey, that was pretty slick!" said Romero, pleased with himself for understanding me.

I shrugged and said, "He'd have been smarter to leave twelve cents attached to every check he processed. That way, every account would have balanced out at the end of the month with odd change." I took a sip of my highball and added, "It was the lack of loose change that gave it away. I just couldn't believe that so many bank statements could end in double zeros."

"Why did you pick the number twelve, Ross?" asked Linda.

Bradshaw Spinner said, "I can answer that, honey. Twelve is more divisible than any other number. Right, Ross?"

I nodded and said, "You can divide twelve by two, three, four, or six. So adding up a string of twelves gives you a more random-looking series of numbers than any other number would."

I lost Romero that time. He shook his head and said, "Let's get back to this here computer, huh? You don't want to bust it up just yet, right?"

"Not unless we have to," I answered.

"But you can't switch the damned thing off, and dammit, it's killing people!"

"It's been having lousy luck with me so far," I replied. "And I'm torching it open in the morning, come hell or high water."

"Yeah, well, what if it kills you in the meantime?"

"I'll be dead."

Romero shot the police captain a look and asked, "What do you think, Bob?"

"I only work here," said the man from the private guard service.

Romero said, "I'll have to talk this over with the sheriff, but I know what he's going to say. He's going to say we can go along with you people up to a point. But let that silly bucket of bolts pull any more of this stuff and we're going to blast it to hell and gone, and I don't care *what* it's got in its tin guts!"

I'd known he was going to say it. But I still wished he hadn't. If any of the people listening had anything to hide or anything to do with the thinkertinker's homicidal tendencies, Romero had just told them they'd better give it another try!

Considering we hadn't caught any fish Sunday afternoon, Linda was a real sport about it. We spent the afternoon hiking near the Seven Lakes to get our adrenalin down to normal. And then the next day she invited me up for a crack at her home cooking.

That's when my adrenalin started building up again. She changed into a pair of lounging pajamas and began to fix some steak and potatoes in her automated kitchenette. Meanwhile, I nursed a Scotch and water in the smallish

studio off the kitchenette. She only had Clan MacGregor, but what the hell, you can't have everything.

It only took her a few moments to put the food on the assembly line and join me on the studio couch. I wondered if she slept on it or if that wide door across the room concealed a Murphy bed. But first things first. We hadn't even eaten yet.

She fixed a drink for herself. But I noticed she was chain-smoking up a storm. I said, "What's the matter, honey? You have a thing about lung cancer, or are you really as jumpy as I think you are?"

"Both," she said wanly. "I'll be so relieved to see an end to this mess. You really think you'll be able to open the system up in the morning?"

"Unless they've invented a steel that stands up to oxyacetalene," I replied. "I've got a few other surprises for our mad Frankenstein, too. That steak smells good."

"You mean it smells like it's burning!" Linda said, sliding off the couch to inspect the damage. I heard her say, "Damn, I set those steaks for medium rare and—Ross, will you come here a minute?"

I walked over to her, drink in hand, and asked what was up. She pointed to a front-loading automatic washing machine and said, "That thing's *on!*"

"So what?"

"So I didn't turn it on, Ross. There's nothing to be washed in there, but it's starting the wash cycle."

"So we turn it off," I said, flicking the switch.

Nothing happened.

"Ross! It's happening again!"

I flicked the shutoff switch a few more times, and then I laughed and said, "No way, for Pete's sake! It's just an automatic washer, Linda. It can't hurt us."

"Then why is it running? And why won't it turn off?"

"Short somewhere," I insisted. "Look, even if this twonky *is* being manipulated in some way, what's it going to do? Wash us to death? You said yourself it's empty. The worst that can happen is that it spills over, and you've a drain right there in your tile floor!"

"I keep thinking about that lawn mower—"

"Stop it! The thing's bolted to the floor. Matter of fact, if it wasn't bolted to the floor, I'd pull it away from the wall and unplug it. Tell you what, let's relax and eat our steaks, and after dinner, if it's still acting up, I'll get some tools from the car and put it back together for you."

"You mean eat with that nutty washing machine washing a lot of nothing?"

"Why not? Don't you ever eat with the washing machine on?"

"I'm some kind of religious fanatic," she managed to say, adding, "besides, I like my machinery to do things *my* way. You know what they say about uppity mechanical servants."

"Give them an inch and they take a mile?"

"Familiarity breeds contempt. That damned washing machine's seen me without my clothes, and for all I know, it's getting fresh!"

We both laughed, and Linda put our food on a tray and brought it out to the coffee table by the studio couch. The steaks were good, even if Linda did insist they'd been overcooked. I like a chick who knows enough to serve a man steak. There'd been this one silly broad on East Seventy-Second Street who made the most godawful duck l'orange . . . But never mind.

Linda said something about coffee as I was downing the last of my steak. And then her eyes widened and she gasped, "Ross! The machine's overflowing!"

I turned to see a tongue of white detergent foam oozing across the carpet at us from the kitchenette.

I said, "That's funny. I was sure there was a drain in there. Must be stopped up."

I got to my feet, and Linda asked, "What are you going to do?"

"Unplug the drain, first. Then I'm going to fix that silly twonky in there!"

"Don't touch that foam, Ross!" she sobbed.

"Come again?" I said. "That's *soap*, Linda."

"How do you *know* it's soap? The way things have been happening around here, those suds could be anything!"

I started to laugh. Then I reached in my pocket, took

out a pen knife, and touched the blade to the oncoming foam. Nothing happened until I grounded the knife handle on a nearby outlet plate. I drew an arc that was something else!

"The damned stuff's conductive!" I marveled. "Must have some sodium chloride in the water, and it's pulling juice from the baseboard outlet in your kitchenette. I don't see why it hasn't blown the circuit breakers, though. Must be drawing a hell of a wild charge and—"

"For God's sake! Are you going to lecture me about electricity, or are you going to do something?"

"Get some clothes on. We're going to have to get out of here."

"You can't make it stop?"

"Not from here in the apartment. I'll have to see about shutting off the water downstairs, and there has to be a way to switch off the current from outside."

"I'll only be a moment," Linda promised, running into the john.

It took her a few minutes to change into sweater and jeans again. By this time the weird soap suds were halfway across the carpet. I went to the door, put a hand on the knob, and said, "Make sure you bring your purse."

Then I tried to turn the knob.

We were locked in.

"This is silly!" I laughed, albeit weakly.

"The windows are stuck, too. They have electric openers and—"

"Up on the couch," I snapped, as one tongue of the suds oozed toward an electric outlet near the floor. Linda and I climbed aboard her studio couch as the suds rose, and I suddenly thought of something. I asked, "Is this couch foam rubber?"

"Yes. Why do you ask?"

"Get on your hands and knees in the middle of the couch. Don't let any part of your body touch the metal frame."

She started to ask why. Then the first finger of foam reached the outlet, and she didn't have to. There was an

angry hiss of steam as the house current zapped through the saline foam, and again I wondered why every circuit breaker in town didn't throw a fit. The amperage had to be enough to electrocute a platoon. It was arcing like mad. If the rug hadn't been soaking wet, it would have been a smouldering rag!

"It's getting higher!" said Linda quietly.

She was right. I could see we'd managed to trap ourselves on the couch as the electrified detergent foam slowly rose higher and higher. We were eighteen inches above it, tops. Even if we stood up, we were going to get it, and get it good, once the stuff reached twenty-four inches. I moved over to the window, tested the steel sill with my knife, and tore the venetian blinds out of the way. The windows wouldn't budge, and the panes were too small to do us any good even if I managed to break them. The window's stainless steel mullions were too damned close together for us to crawl out between!

Linda's apartment faced away from the shopping mall. There was nobody in sight. But anything was better than simply sitting tight until the foam reached us. I smashed a pane with the handle of my pen knife and called for help.

Nobody answered.

"It's watching us die!" sobbed Linda, pointing past me at the cupola on top of Town Hall. I started to tell her about electric eyes again. Then I had a better idea. I said, "Linda. I want you to beat your chest like a gorilla. Then I want you to fall backward on the couch."

"Have you gone competely insane?"

"Just do it!"

Linda shook her head. Then she yelled like Tarzan, or maybe Jane, and patted herself just above the bra a couple of times before laying back and muttering, "Satisfied?"

I threw my head back, beat my chest as hard as I could, and dove on top of her.

She gasped, "Ross, for God's sake! This is hardly the time for that!"

"Shut up and lie still," I growled. "You're supposed to be dead!"

"Oh? You *do* think someone's watching?"

"There'd better be. Or the next time we play Tarzan, it's going to be for real!"

"People beat their chest when they get electrocuted?"

"If the current goes through their heart and lungs. I think we're in luck. The foam's stopped rising."

There was a chugalug sound from the little kitchenette, and she whispered, "The washing machine's doing something new."

"Rinse cycle," I said. "Having electrocuted us with salty soap suds, it's going to rinse away the evidence!"

"My poor carpeting!" she gagged as the foam suddenly started surging back the way it had come.

I said, "Your clogged drain's back in business. What'll you bet we get a sudden flood of fresh water? That's a nylon carpet, isn't it?"

"Yes, why do you ask?"

"Dry overnight in this weather with the windows open."

"The windows won't open, Ross!"

There was a mild click, and the automated windows started sliding down into their housing as if they belonged in a well-oiled El Dorado.

"Here comes the rinse water!" Linda marveled. "How'd you know the windows were going to open, Ross?"

"We have to be dry when they find us in the morning, don't we?"

"We can climb out!"

"Why bother? Sit tight and we'll be able to walk out. That door's not locked anymore. I heard the relays click a few moments ago. Remind me, though, never to install an electrically activated burglar alarm in any more of your doors!"

It seemed to take forever. But actually it was only a few minutes before the self-willed washing machine had flooded and rinsed the nylon carpet, drained everything away, and switched off innocently.

I said, "Have anything you want to wash and dry? I'll lay you ten to one that twonky works just fine now."

"I'm calling the police!" said Linda.

I said, "Negative. You're supposed to be dead, remember?"

"You think the phone's been tapped?"

"Could be. But I'm more worried about Romero saying what the sheriff's department would do if anything like this were to happen again. I don't want that system demolished before I've examined it for homicidal tendencies."

"It certainly has them," Linda agreed. "And I was right about it watching us, wasn't I?"

"We were being watched, all right. And whomever, or whatever, was watching thinks we're dead. Now let's run that through our own think tanks and see what we come up with, huh?"

"Our bodies wouldn't be discovered until sometime Monday morning," said Linda. "Bradshaw Spinner might wonder why you didn't return to his place tonight. But he wouldn't know where to look for you. The girls on my crew would start to worry about my not showing up by, oh, say ten o'clock. Somebody might get around to coming over here by noon, and they'd see the broken window."

"And find everything in order except for a couple of stiffs," I added. "At least, that's the way our would-be murderer expects it to turn out. Might be interesting to watch the expression on people's faces in the morning, don't you think?"

"Then you suggest we lay low here in my apartment?"

"God, no! I wouldn't leave a budgie bird where that washing machine of yours could get at it! No, we're going to split the scene. We'll go over to Mahwah and check into a motel. In the morning I'll pick up that stuff I ordered and— Not to worry, honey. Needless to say, we'll ask for separate rooms."

Meeting my eyes with a level gaze, Linda answered, "Don't sweat it. I'm on the Pill."

Linda was a bit confused at my leaving both cars until I pointed out they both had the recogniton devices installed and that either could be followed by a directional antenna. We waited until it had gotten a bit darker, and then slipping between the houses, we hiked up to the fire road I'd come in by. We took the better part of an hour, skirting the electric eye beam and hiking up to the boundary fence. We got to the talking gate, and I warned Linda not to touch it. She said, "Gotcha. How do we get through?"

"We go over, of course."

"Isn't it supposed to be electrified?"

"It says it is. But one thing I learned about in Nam was electrified fences. The mesh is stapled directly to steel poles, and the poles are grounded. There's a sensor in the gate, but the rest is pure bluff."

"Then what's to stop a trespasser from simply climbing over?"

"Not a thing. But most people are goosey about being electrocuted."

"I'm sort of getting used to the idea," she muttered dryly.

We walked down by the cemetery wall, and I helped her over the twelve-foot fence. She had to wait until we were

perched on top of it before she asked, "Wouldn't it be funny if this *had* been an electric fence?"

I didn't think the idea was funny at all.

It was quite dark by this time. But we were able to make out the tombstones as we groped our way through the abandoned churchyard to the fire road. I told her about the surly type who'd insisted his identity was none of our business. She said, "I read it. I was up here last summer. There's one stone across the plot that makes me want to cry. It reads, 'Here lies Eliza Donner. At least she tried.' "

"Funny people," I said. "But you know, I sort of like them."

"They're decent," she agreed. "They haven't known us summer people long enough to get ahead in this world."

It was nearly ten by the time we reached the hard top. There was a light in the farmhouse beyond the gnarled apple tree, and we walked toward it. A dog started barking in the house, and a male voice shouted, *"Rustig, Kopje!"*

Then the door opened, and the same farmer I'd spoken to that first day peered out and said, "So?"

"Mr. Donner?" I called.

Donner hesitated before he asked cautiously, "You with the tax people? I paid this year, dammit. I got a receipt!"

I said, "We're not with the government, Mr. Donner. We want to rent your pickup."

"What's the matter with your own car?"

"We haven't got one with us. We have to run into Mahwah for the night, and I was wondering if you'd rent us your pickup until high noon tomorrow."

Donner came out on the porch, squinting at us in the dim light as he asked, "Are you funning me, mister?"

Then he spotted Linda and said, "You're that Miss Crawford over to Cybernia, ain't you?"

"Yes, it's very important, Mr. Donner."

"Well, Cousin Emily says you're all right. So I guess I can let you have the pickup for one night."

He reached in his pocket, took out a key ring, and unsnapped an ignition key. As he handed it to me, I asked, "How much do we owe you, Mr. Donner?"

"What are you talking about?" he growled. "Didn't I just tell you Cousin Emily said this lady was all right?"

I'm tempted to say that where we stayed that night and what happened between midnight and morning is none of your damn business. But I guess you're as curious as I was about Linda being on the Pill.

His name had been something like Bruce, and he'd been a summer person. Linda told me about it over breakfast at the motel, and I asked how come, if it was all over, she'd stayed on the Pill.

"It's hard on the glands to jump off and on," she explained. "Besides, I knew I was going to meet you."

"You mean me me or just some guy me?"

"I don't sleep with some guy yous," Linda said gently. "You're always something special, whoever you are."

"Then you didn't mean what you said last night in the room?"

"Of course I meant it, darling. I always do. What's that the French say about loving each love more than the last love and less than the next love?"

"I wouldn't know," I answered stiffly. "I don't speak French."

She put a hand on my wrist and murmured, "Does it bother you that much, Ross? I thought you said friends should level, even when they happen to be lovers."

I said, "Of course it doesn't."

"Would it have helped if I said I was a virgin?"

"Oh, for Christ's sake, no!" I lied.

That's the trouble with the so-called sexual revolution. It's gotten us hipped on instant sex, and then when somebody sort of special comes along, we can't cope. If the truth would be known, us single swingers all want to meet a virgin. Preferably a virgin who's very careful about taking her pills and suffers from terminal nymphomania. We want to meet a girl like Linda. But we'd just as soon not hear about Bruce.

After we'd checked out, I drove Donner's pickup to the hardware store. Linda hadn't let me down. But the hardware dealer had. He was very apologetic. But he didn't have the cutting torch I'd ordered. I picked up some other gear, and we headed back to Cybernia.

We packed the truck at Donner's, walked back along the fire trail, and climbed back over the fence. The stuff I'd bought in Mahwah was a little heavy. But I was looking forward to getting down to the computer's nitty-gritty, and I guess my motor circuits were a bit keyed up. Linda had to ask me to slow down more than once.

We arrived at Town Hall a little after ten. Five girls were seated at the consoles in the input section. One of them looked up and said, "Linda, where have you been? We were starting to worry about you."

She had Iroquois bone structure under her dark complexion. I studied her oddly blue eyes as Linda introduced her as Emily Drukker. If the girl was wondering how come we were still alive, you couldn't tell.

I said, "Your Cousin, Donner, says you're all right."

Nothing. She was devoid of humor or possessed of wooden Indian facial control. Emily Drukker had to be filed as an unknown quantity.

None of the other girls seemed uptight until I started putting them to work. I gave each girl written instructions and sent them on five separate errands. More to get them

out of there than because I thought anything would turn up. Linda called the police and explained that they might as well ignore any complaints the computer system intended to make for the next few hours.

Meanwhile, I'd been studying the tape storage bank, and when I started to work with a Phillips screwdriver, she came over and asked me what I was doing.

I said, "See these Phillips head screws? Every unit except this one has screws with the factory finish intact."

"That one doesn't?"

"These four are worn just enough for me to make an educated guess they've been turned more than once. I'm going to open this panel and see what's behind it."

"Isn't that simply a way in to clean out the lower recording heads?"

"Supposed to be. But why should anyone spend so much time cleaning this particular unit?"

By this time I'd opened the front of what the label said was a storage unit attached to an IBM 360 M 75. I found myself staring at a pair of sealed-beam headlights. They were on.

Linda gasped, "What in the world are those lights doing in there?"

"Shining," I grunted.

"But that's crazy! They'd be right against the rear of that panel when it was closed!"

I went over to the tool kit I'd lugged in, took a length of clip-end cable from it, and grounded one clip. I touched the other to the bracket the headlights had been mounted on and drew a six-inch arc.

"Look out!" shouted Linda, gagging on the acrid taste of ozone in the air.

I said, "This thing sure likes to shock people."

"You're not going to *touch* it, are you?" she gasped as I slipped on a pair of rubber gauntlets.

I said, "Not to worry. Voltage takes the path of least resistance, and that cable's draining every volt it cares to throw into Mamma Earth."

I reached inside, albeit gingerly, and dismounted the

pair of meaningless headlights. Out in the light of day, turned off, they were just a plain set of iodine quartz jobs off a French sports car. I cut the wire leading back into the mysterious depths of the impossible data processing system, and the headlights went out. I put them on a nearby input console and went to work on the pegboard they'd been attached to. I clipped another ground cable on the end of a keyhole saw and started humming "Whistle While You Work" as I sawed down one side of the fiber pegboard.

Yeah, it had been booby-trapped. I could feel the wires snap as the blade chewed through them. But, of course, with the blade grounded, I only drew an arc on the back stroke. Had I neglected to ground the saw, I imagine it would have tingled.

A bell started to ring, and a flat metallic voice began to shout, "FIRE! FIRE! FIRE! ALL UNITS REPORT AT ONCE TO THE TOWN HALL! FIRE! FIRE! FIRE! THIS IS NO DRILL!"

I grinned at Linda and said, "Curiouser and curiouser, Alice."

"I don't get it," she said. "Why is it shouting fire when you're sawing?"

"Because I told everyone I was going to open it with an acetylene torch," I replied. "Makes you wonder, doesn't it?"

"That means the murderer knows we escaped from the apartment!"

"Well, I'm sure he or she does now. This latest tape could have been recorded before they tried the bit with the washing machine in your pad. Hand me the end of that shock cord, will you?"

Linda stepped over to my tool chest and held up one end of a sixty-foot coil of rubber shock cord, asking, "This it?"

I nodded, and when she handed me the end, I bent over and put a half hitch around my ankle. Linda asked what I was doing, and I said, "You remember the bit with the chest beating? I'm going in, and if I start to make like Tar-

zan, I want you to haul me off. Make sure you don't touch anything else, though, including me."

Emily Drukker came back about then and had to be filled in as I finished sawing away the improvised back panel. I asked her what they'd told her over at the data processing plant. She said, "They said this tape you gave me to run was a lot of garbage. The man wouldn't believe it came from a 360 M 75. He put it on the big 7094, and it gave a reading that came out something like Russian. Only it wasn't Russian, the man said. He said it was just a lot of letters run together without rhyme or reason."

"Figures," I said. Yanking out the last of the pegboard, I took out my pencil flashlight and shot a cautious beam around the inner edge of the gaping cavity. I found another live wire, grounded it, and then I found something else. I gasped in mingled anger and surprise, "Oh, you *are* a friendly son of a bitch, aren't you?"

"What is it?" Linda asked.

"Dynamite fuse," I said. "It was stretched across the inside, and I cut right through it with the saw. Needless to remark, I was supposed to be using a flaming oxyacetalene torch, remember?"

"You'd better stop right now," said Linda. "You're going to blow us all to bits if you're not careful!"

"I'm being careful. But you girls had better blow."

"Who's going to pull you out if something happens in there?"

It was a good question.

I said, "I'll be okay. Split the scene, kids."

"I'm staying," said Linda.

"Me too," agreed the Drukker girl.

I didn't have time to argue, and that was hardly the time to punch anyone on the jaw and carry them out of the building. So trailing the shock cord by one ankle, I started crawling head first inside the thinkertinker.

The first thing I found was a bottle. It was lying on the concrete directly below the opening. The label said it had been full of gin once. At the moment it was empty. The dynamite had been wired to the lower back of the dummy

storage unit. There were seven sticks taped in a neat bundle. If I'd lit that fuse with my head inside the storage unit, one would have been enough.

I flashed the beam around me and marveled at the mess. There was a space of about two feet between the wall of 360 components and the damnedest collection of electronic junk I'd ever seen outside a Signal Corps warehouse. I hauled myself inside, pulling a bundle of grounding cables and my tool kit in with me. The crawl space was festooned with a cobweb of wires. How many were live was anyone's guess at the moment.

I heard male voices outside and peeked out. It was Councilman Greenspan. The police captain was with him, and they wanted to know why the alarm system was accusing me of arson. I told them. Then I handed the police captain the bundle of dynamite and asked, "Get rid of this, will you?"

He said, "Sweet Jesus! What else have you got in there with you, a basket of cobras?"

I drew an arc from an innocent-looking wire, grounded it, and said, "You name it. It's in here. So far, I've spotted input components made by IBM, NCR, Honeywell, and good God, an analog computer from a Norden bomb sight! Most of it seems to be haywired to another bulkhead, and if any of it works, it's some sort of super input system."

"What does an input system do?"

"It inputs. Ask Linda to fill you in, captain. I've got to get back to the salt mines!"

I ran my pencil beam along a coaxle cable until it ended in midair. I grunted, "Window dressing. The whole thing is just some kid's idea of a mad scientist's secret laboratory."

Since I couldn't for the life of me see the slightest reason for the Norden bomb sight, I grounded it, unbolted it from the gridwork behind it, and when it wouldn't come away, hit it with a wrench. There was an angry rattlesnake sputter of sparks, and then it died at my feet. I peered into the second opening. It was too small to crawl through, but I could see what lay beyond.

Another bulkhead covered with odds and ends of computer parts wired together in what seemed a meaningless pattern. Linda called in, "Find anything, hon?"

"Another layer of wrapping," I called back. "This one wants to grow up to be a massive *output* bank. I'm going to have to go easy on this. Output components could mean something. But if this keeps up all the way to the far wall, I'm going to be days unwrapping this mess! It's sort of like those Chinese boxes that have one box in another box in another box. Wouldn't it be a gas if, when I unwrapped the last layer, there was nothing inside?"

By late afternoon I was covered with sweat, cobwebs, dust, and a couple of electrical burns I'd picked up taking chances. The girls I'd sent out on various errands had all reported in to Linda. Their reports made little more sense than the circuits I was trying to trace in that maze of Gordon's. If Gregory Gordon or anyone else with a bit of common sense had actually put the thing together.

The magnetic tapes stored in the front units were a mass of meaningless data, overprinted with repeated messages the girls had been feeding over and over to the same tapes. Duplicate wires ran too deep in the maze for me to know where they went. I traced another message cable from the back of the improvised output typer to where it vanished into a mousehole torched out of a steel bulkhead.

Apparently some input *did* go somewhere. But where it went and how the output managed such fresh answers were still mysteries. The biggest mystery, though, was where the juice was coming from. According to the maintenance electricians the computer was completely cut off from outside power, and I had enough grounds attached to blow a dozen bus bars into silver vapor.

I scribbled diagrams and notes until I'd run out of paper and gotten a sick headache from all the ozone those arcs were throwing off in the confined space. Then, having more than enough data to keep me busy for a week, I crawled out.

Bradshaw Spinner had joined the group by this time. He said he'd just heard about the dynamite and wanted to know if we shouldn't evacuate the area. I told him there was little danger to the community with the possible explosion below ground level. He said, "Maybe, Ross. But what happens if you hit a booby trap while you're crawling around in there?"

"Just see that my kid brother Billy gets my scholarship to NYU. It's a college."

"Do you have a kid brother?"

"No. But I can't think of anything better to say."

We drove into New York that night. Partly because I was getting sick of waiting around in small town hardware stores and also because neither of us wanted to take a chance on sleeping within reach of Cybernia.

We took my car.

We stopped at Linda's just long enough for her to change into something suitable for a night on the town, and then I took the throughway down to Manhattan and pulled up in front of my apartment on East Fifty-Third in less than two hours. The apartment has no garage. But if you take care of the doorman, he takes care of the cops. Parking in front of a hydrant is safer than most of the car basheries in the area.

We just went up long enough for Linda to use the john and freshen up a bit. Then we went back down to the street, hailed a cab, and had dinner at the Sign of the Dove.

It was hard to believe, as we sat there amid the Beautiful People in the Swinging Sixties, that less than a drive away there were hill folk who'd never eaten in a restaurant or seen the inside of a beauty shop. Linda said something wistful about a flick that was showing at Cinema East. But I explained some of my reasons for getting back to the pad, aside from her fair white body, and she agreed it

might be more important to find out who was trying to kill us.

I called Warren Bancroft at home, and the first thing he said was, "MacLean, you lazy bastard, why weren't you at work this morning?"

"I've been down with a little virus," I lied.

Bancroft chuckled and said, "I saw you with your little virus. Coming out of the Sign of the Dove. Nice-looking head, Ross. But Jesus Christ, we have to fix that NCR system for Parkinson, Miller and Dunhill!"

"I'll get back to it before the market closes on Friday," I lied. "Meanwhile, the reason I'm calling is because I need some stuff from the shop."

I started listing the supplies I wanted to check out, and he cut in to ask, "I know you're moonlighting, old buddy, but isn't safe cracking a bit out of our line?"

"It's only a little bank," I soothed. "Will you call the night man and tell him it's okay?"

"What if I don't?"

"Then you can tell Parkinson, Miller and Dunhill to count on their fingers. I mean it, Warren. This job's more than important to me. It's downright personal."

"Hey, let's not get our bowels in an uproar, Ross! I'll let you check the stuff out. But leave us forget the threatening gestures, huh? I know a good EDP man nowadays is hard to find. But don't push it, old buddy!"

"I'm sorry," I said. "It's just that my virus and I have been screwed, blewed, and tattooed by some wise-ass up in North Jersey, and my fighting blood is up."

"Well, save it for fighting him, for God's sake! How soon do you need the stuff?"

"A couple of days ago. But I'll settle for driving back up the Hudson with it tonight."

"You're not staying in town?"

"Negative. We told everyone we were. So I imagine our opponent has his guard down. I'd like to throw a left hook about four in the morning and see how he goes about ducking!"

"Why are we stopping?" Linda was saying as I pulled into the deserted filling station at three in the morning.

I said, "Have to jam that recognition device they installed behind my grille. Not much sense in dropping back unexpectedly unless you're sure you're unexpected."

"Not much sense in anything you've been doing tonight!" laughed Linda. "First you tell me you're taking me into New York for a night on the town and now—"

"Told everyone else, too, remember?" I cut in, opening the door.

As I opened the hood, Linda got out and joined me, saying, "Ross, I just thought of something. Won't we be stopped anyway? The only reason for the electronic signal is so that Cybernia residents can come and go as they please without tripping the automated alarms at the entrances to the valley."

I said, "The *real* reason for the microwave sets is to let our secret pal know every time a car enters or leaves Cybernia. The system's already recorded our leaving earlier this evening. I have no intention of letting it record our arrival."

"But a car without the recognition signal device will trip an alarm. Won't the computer sense that?"

"Not if I can help it," I muttered, disconnecting the microwave device and slamming the hood back down.

We got back in, and Linda said, "Like, wow, darling, you're almost as mysterious as that thing in the basement. We tell everyone we're spending the night in New York, zap back in the wee small hours with five or six hundred pounds of farout electronic gear, and mutter mysterious threats against Cybernia's almost human security system!"

"The only thing human about it is the human who's pulling the secret strings," I said, throwing the car in gear and pulling back onto the road. "The exterior defenses are feedback gizmos you can buy from half a dozen mail-order houses. There's a simple photoelectric beam tied in with an automated microwave signal device. No computation involved at all. Just a couple of feedback loops. The photocells trip one switch when an unknown object breaks the light beam. That turns on the microwave sender, and unless its signal is answered by another within a split second, a lag circuit starts yelling that the Redcoats are coming. The police cars are notified by a recorded tape giving the location of the unauthorized intruder. Meanwhile, another tape freezes the suspect in place by yakking at him until someone can rub the sleep out of his eyes, put down his comic book, and pick up the conversation via an ordinary intercom system hidden nearby."

"So where does the computer enter into the picture?"

"It doesn't. But what'll you bet our unseen puppet master has an intercom of his own, wired into the alarm system? If he feels like impressing the peasants, he can throw in some spooky words of his own, and unless you know something about the current state of the art, you might think you were getting it from the computer or maybe the Wizard of Oz."

"I've heard the computer talk," she insisted. "Not in the data processing center itself but over the loudspeaker system."

"You heard a human being talking into a special effects mike," I sneered. "It's not hard to sound like a robot or what we think a robot would sound like. They use all sorts of weird voiceovers on television commercials."

"What about the stuff it put out on the type head?"

"Some of it's legitimate data processing output. The

fresh remarks are typed or taped on a hidden console and inserted into the software. Probably by way of an induction coil. I'm pretty certain some of the apparent breaks I found in the circuitry this afternoon are bridged by electromagnetic induction and—"

"That's where one wire picks up the current from another without actually being in contact, right?"

"Sure. How do you think a telephone tap works? Used to be you had to splice into someone's wire. Then the wise money tappers remembered you could wrap a few turns of fine wire around the outside of the insulation and connect it to a beefed-up set of ear phones. With a really good induction coil you can listen in on a phone conversation without touching Ma Bell's equipment."

"Could the thing Gordon built be getting its power that way?"

"I'm not sure. Guy named Tesla sent power through the air, as a radio beam, before either of us was born. I also knew a guy who lived close enough to a high-tension line to steal his house current that way. Had an induction coil running the length of his ridge pole, lined up with the overhead lines. Never paid a dime for electricity until they caught up with him."

"How'd they do that?"

"Trying to trace the short they thought they had in the line. You don't get something for nothing. The power he'd been draining out of midair had to come from somewhere. So there was an unexplained loss of voltage every time he turned on 'I Love Lucy.' "

I slowed down as we were approaching an all-night cafeteria. Linda asked what we were stopping for this time and I said, "Gas and we may as well grab a bite."

I waited until I'd tooled our tray through the cafeteria line and gotten Linda settled down with some chicken liver and apple pie. Then I excused myself to go to the john and, while I was at it, made a phone call.

Tony Lamont was a little annoyed at being awakened at that hour, but he simmered down when I explained what I wanted. Tony works for the Jersey branch of a certain government agency he'd just as soon not have you know

too much about. Suffice to say, a man who wanders around from one data processing system to another is sometimes in the position to give Uncle Sam a little information he might not otherwise hear about and since one hand washes the other . . .

"I don't know, Ross," Lamont was saying. "From what you've told me, that doesn't sound like a federal case, and you know how the Director feels about us getting involved in personal vendettas."

"Vendetta my ass, I'm talking about *murder!*"

"We couldn't come in without the cooperation of the state and local authorities. What's the setup in that area, usual county structure?"

"Private guards and a local sheriff given to blowing up things he can't understand with dynamite! Look, there might be a tax angle. The Cybernia Corporation must pay federal taxes and—"

"So call your friends in IRS."

"I don't have any friends with IRS."

"Neither do we. My bureau doesn't investigate tax cases, Ross."

"Interstate crime?"

"If you can show any. I thought you were having trouble with some nut running amok in a housing development."

"Look, the information I need could be sort of off the record, couldn't it?"

"Not if it's classified. You've been cleared to give *us* information, Ross. Not for us to give it to *you!*"

"So you bend a rule as a favor to a friend—" I began.

But Tony Lamont sputtered, "Are you kidding? I wouldn't bend a rule laid down by the Director for my mother! For chrissake, Ross, I can be busted for letting my hair grow too long!"

"Makes it easy to pass for a radical," I muttered. I started to tell him to forget the whole thing. But then a sudden thought hit me and I asked, "Hey, Tony, are you recording all this?"

"Just for my supervisor," he soothed. "I'll tell him it was a personal call, and he may not want to hear it at all."

"Why couldn't anyone go around the alarm system?" marveled Linda as we drove slowly into Cybernia with our lights dimmed.

I said, "Anyone could, if they were expecting to see a photoelectric cell lurking around the bend of a country road. That alarm is to stop wandering summer people, not us burglar types who enjoy driving through blackberry bushes in the dark."

"We must have left tracks where you drove through the roadside vegetation."

"So we left tracks," I said. "Who's going to wake our secret pal up at four in the morning to tell him about them—a raccoon?"

"Just the same, he'll know we're in town by morning."

"Everyone will know we're in town sooner or later," I said. "My idea was only to make it a little later than sooner."

Motor vehicles were forbidden in the center of town, but there was an access and delivery drive leading to the service entrance of Town Hall. I pulled as close to the cellar doors as I could and said, "Here we go again."

"Aren't you going to switch off your engine?"

"Negative. I've got a jump wire in the trunk I'm attach-

ing to my own generator. I don't trust the juice in that building. Especially when there isn't supposed to be any."

"Our unknown genius could detect a drain on his mystery current, too, couldn't he?"

"God knows what he can detect. Let's hope he's asleep."

We got out and a sleepy-looking uniformed guard wandered over with a shotgun cradled in his arms. He yawned hello when he saw who we were and told us Councilman Couver, acting as temporary city manager, had ordered a twenty-four-hour watch.

"Good thinking," I said. "Maybe this time nobody's had a chance to leave any dynamite where a growing boy could find it. Is there a man on the front?"

"Sure, Mr. MacLean. Nobody's been in or out since you were here last."

Linda and the guard watched with interest as I unloaded the stuff I'd brought from New York. I attached the coil of heavy duty cable to the terminals and, leaving the engine at a fast idle, said, "You want to carry this in for me, officer? Watch out for the switch on that plug."

Linda picked up some of the other gear, and I got the rest. The guard started for the cellar door, paying out the power line as he went. But I said, "No, back entrance."

Linda said, "But, Ross, there's no stairway leading from the ground floor to the basement."

"I know. Makes you wonder, doesn't it? How many public buildings have you ever seen laid out that way?"

"You think there may be a hidden stairway, leading to the basement and . . . Oh, I get it! Any stairway we don't know about would put you *behind* the computer down there!"

"You're getting warm. But I'm not about to waste time searching for secret panels. Especially secret panels with built-in alarm signals."

"Then how are you going to investigate the computer from the upper level?"

"By going through the floor, of course."

"Ross, that's a concrete slab!"

"Not to worry. The diamond teeth on this power saw here eat concrete for breakfast. Let's see now. If I wanted to bug Town Hall, where would I start, besides the john . . . ?"

"You think there are listening devices installed in the building?"

"Sure, probably a plaster bug in every office."

The guard produced a key and let us in. The offices of Town Hall opened on a cruciform corridor. I lugged my heavy equipment to the dead center of the building and grounded the power saw with another length of insulated line. I shushed the two of them and opened the nearby door of the public washroom. Working quietly, I attached the other end of the ground wire to a water pipe and tiptoed back outside.

Then I told the guard he'd better go back to his post and handed Linda my jacket. I waited until we were alone and said, "Here goes nothing."

Then I proceeded to cut a manhole in the middle of the tiled concrete floor.

It took a while. Concrete is tough, even when it's not reinforced by expanded metal mesh. But diamond grit is tough, too, and I cut three-quarters of the circle with no sweat. Then I let the saw cool while I drilled a hole in the center of the circle, drove a length of lead tubing in, and twisted a screw-eye in place.

I looped a length of spare wire through the screw-eye, handed both ends to Linda, and said, "Keep a little tension on this, will you, honey? Careful you don't let it fall inside when I cut her the rest of the way. It's going to be heavy."

Linda nodded and braced herself out of my way. As I was cutting through the last of the floor slab, she said, "I hope you know what you're doing, darling. It's nearly dawn!"

"I think we've got an hour or so, even if our puppet master's an early riser. He'll probably want a cup of coffee before he checks things out, and with luck, we haven't

tripped any signals that'll tell him we're not shacked up in the Big City."

"I wish you wouldn't say shacked up," sighed Linda.

It was nice to know she had a few hangups to go with her sexual emancipation.

The saw blade chattered wildly, and I switched off the power before it could explode in my face. For an uneasy moment I was afraid I'd hit a beam. But the blade was only worn. As I was changing it, Linda asked, "Won't the computer or puppet master or Gordon's ghost or whatever you think it is, see your car parked out back and put two and two together?

"I hope not," I grunted, twisting the key wrench. "I think we're out of his line of sight."

"Oh, that's right. Those electric eyes face north, and we're parked on the south side of the building."

I didn't answer.

The new blade cut faster, and the last of the disk suddenly cracked loose and nearly pulled Linda off balance as she gasped, "My, it *is* heavy!"

Then I helped her lift it out of place, and we were staring down into a great black hole.

I switched on the powerful flashlight I'd brought from the car and beamed it down into the pit.

The first thing I saw was a human face!

I gasped and jerked back from the opening, the flashlight beam lashing down the corridor. Then, as I got hold of my jangled nerves and leaned forward again, Linda asked what it was I'd seen.

"A girl," I answered. "I think she's dead!"

I shone the light down in there again and took a second look. As I swept the beam over the nude body reclining on a red plush couch, I saw it belonged to a blonde of about twenty-five. She was built like the proverbial sanitary facility. If she was dead, she hadn't been that way long. Her flesh was pale, but there was none of that waxy look that follows death by a few hours. The abdomen was unbloated. In fact, it was very nicely put together. She had about a twenty-one inch waist to go with the ample hips and

heroically proportioned breasts. But how could she have gotten there? And why wasn't she breathing?

Linda peered over my shoulder and gasped, "Oh, my God, it's a girl I've seen someplace. Is she . . . ?"

"I'll know better in a minute."

"You're going down there?"

"Hell yes, I'm going down there. Even if she's alive, she can't weigh more than a hundred and ten pounds, and I'd sort of like to ask a few questions before she picks up that telephone beside the couch!"

Suiting my actions to my words, I dropped a couple of insulated lines through the opening and followed them. I hung by my hands until my feet stopped swinging and dropped the last few feet to the floor of the secret room.

The floor was covered with red carpeting. I raised the beam of my flashlight and got another nasty turn as I found myself staring at about five hundred other guys with flashlights!

Then I realized I was in a small room lined with floor-to-ceiling mirrors. My reflection ran off into infinity on all sides. The view of the reclining nude was something else, too!

I tiptoed to the couch, moved the telephone out of reach, and put a hand on her naked shoulder. Her flesh was as cold as the grave. But she suddenly opened her eyes, smiled knowingly, and whispered huskily, "Hi, lover. It's been a long time!"

I stammered, "What the hell are you doing down here, miss?"

The nude purred sleepily and asked, "For God's sake, why are you still wearing your clothes? Hurry, darling! I'm so hot for you I can't stand it!"

"What's going on?" called Linda from above.

Before I could answer, the blonde husked, "Oh, my God, you've got a lovely body!" and I began to get the picture.

I ran the beam along the bottom of the couch as the blonde suddenly spread her thighs, caressed her own breasts, and sighed, "Oh, that's lovely. I love it when you eat me first!"

"Is she crazy?" asked Linda.

I said, "No, she's an automaton. Remember me telling you about the love toy that Spinner thought Gordon was working on when he died?"

"That girl's a . . . a *robot?*"

I found the cord, followed it to the outlet, and said, "The people at Disneyland build cleaner-living ones."

"Oh, yummy, yummy, yummy!" burbled the automated mistress as I reached for the plug. She sighed, "Oh, God, darling. Put it in my—put it in my—put it in my—put it . . ." and then her recorded lust ran down, and she just lay there smiling, with her thighs apart.

It was just as well. Even knowing what she was, I was starting to wonder, only in a detached way you understand, what it would be like to . . .

"I know where I've seen that girl before!" laughed Linda. "She's a window dummy over at the dress shop on the mall!"

"Soft plastic duplicate of her," I corrected. "He stacked her a little better while he was at it, too. Gordon *was* a dirty old man, wasn't he?"

"Help me, I'm coming down."

I started to object. But Linda was lowering herself through the opening and I reached up to grab her hips as she dropped at my side. She glanced around at the mirrored walls and gasped, "You can say dirty again. Though it does look like fun. How do we get out of here?"

I found a finger latch on one of the mirrors, and it slid open at a touch. I beamed the light beyond the opening and met the rear of a 360 M 75 storage bank. Sweeping to the right, I illuminated the relay system of an NCR output system. We were somewhere in the bowels of a more sensible computer system. There wasn't a Norden bomb sight or a burned-out radio tube in sight. Just off the entry to Gordon's play room there was a desk with an IBM selectric, a Marchand calculator, and a small digital desk computer. Apparently the eccentric Gordon had kept a few secrets from the people he worked for.

Linda followed me, turning at the door to tell the auto-

mated blonde, "Leave him alone. I saw him first." Then she asked what I thought I'd found.

I said, "That Chinaman with the abacus, I think. There's some input storage stuff in here. But mostly he seems to have buried a mass of output controls behind a booby-trapped facade of gobbledygook. Did Gordon hire you in the first place?"

"No," said Linda. "Ed Morton took my application after Gordon was killed. I don't know who was in charge of the input up to that time."

"Probably Gordon himself," I said. "That was Ed's first mistake. Hiring a trained key punch operator instead of breaking in his own help from among the uneducated hill girls around here. It must have thrown the system into a purple funk! Somebody must have been busy as hell, rerouting information loops before you could get wise."

"I'm afraid they wasted their time then," said Linda. "I really don't know that much about cybernetic theory. All they ever taught me to do was punch a few keys and decode the readout."

"And Emily and the others know even less," I said. "Yeah, a guy could really play God with a setup like this. Some kids build HO Sets. Others build towns. The God game is better with HO sets. They don't build human beings in HO scale. So your choochoos do exactly what you tell them to. But I guess it's more exciting with a real town."

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Linda.

I said, "Can't you see it, honey? Gordon was in on the ground floor when they planned this model community. Cybernetics were just getting big with the semieducated fifteen years ago. So he was able to sell them the idea of a computerized central control system to take care of the routine chores of running Cybernia."

"The whole thing was a fake?"

"Oh, no, it's a damned good automation system, as a matter of fact. From what I saw back here and what I figured out from the notes I took before, he put together a complete 7094 computer layout, interspersed with mockups and a very elaborate override control setup."

"In other words?"

"In other words, the system can and does work as a complete data processing system, an automation control center, a message center tapped in to every communications device in Cybernia, and . . . well, puppet strings. The override circuits mean that someone with the right code can make any automated machine in Cybernia do just about anything it can be programmed for. I imagine someone has to turn a screw here and there. That salt had to be added to your detergent, for instance. But basically our puppet master can sit in his own pad, somewhere in Cybernia and play God by pushing buttons."

Linda stared down at the controls on the dead man's hidden desk and asked, "He never has to come here at all?"

"Not within a mile," I answered. "Gordon must have given him the idea while he was still alive. The crazy little drunk did his God bit from this desk. But after he died—No, wait a minute. That's *why* he died!"

"What do you mean, darling?"

"I mean the murderer caught on to what Gordon was up to, saw the possibilities, and wired himself into the act. Once he had his own master override—"

"He made Gordon's lawn mower kill him!" Linda gasped.

I said, "No, I'm familiar with the gizmo Gordon had on that automated mower. The thing's a simple magnetic rider. It's not a new invention. If you have the bread, you can bury ordinary steel cable under your lawn in a regular mowing pattern, and the electric rotary will follow it over the lawn to the end of the last sweep and shut itself off. There are no remote controls involved."

"Then why did it attack Gordon like that?"

"It didn't. Someone who knew Gordon was working on it looped a length of cable in a circle, knocked Gordon out, laid him across the cable, and went for a walk before setting a time switch. I'll never be able to prove it, but that's the only way it could work."

"Then the murderer could have been anyone in Cybernia?"

"Anyone within a hundred miles," I said. "A mail-order timer that turns on the electricity at dawn would allow you to knock a man out while it was still dark and drive to New York before the thing started killing him!"

"Maybe Gordon was already dead? I certainly hope so!"

"He was alive. They heard him screaming, remember? The man was a drunk, but when I say he was knocked out, I'm talking about a mickey. Our friend, or friends, don't go in for physical violence with their bare hands."

"But what if Gordon had come to his senses before he was run over by the machine?"

"What if he did? The murderer would simply have had to try again. Gordon wouldn't have known it was attempted murder if his brain child suddenly started cutting grass for no particular reason. He'd have wondered how he could have gotten drunk enough not to remember setting it. Then he'd have gone back to making love to his overgrown Barbie doll in there." A thought struck me, and I said, "Too bad the murderer didn't know about his secret hobby. I can think of a couple of very nasty tricks he could have played on poor old Gordon!"

"At least he might have died happy," Linda said.

I lead the way between the banked relay units, shining my beam around. I guess we went thirty or forty feet before I started wondering why the floor was covered with metal decking instead of concrete. I ran the beam along the overhead and mused, "We're not quite as far below grade in this neck of the thinkertinker. The ceiling's about two feet lower."

"You mean the floor's two feet higher," objected Linda. "We know the floor above is dead level, darling."

I said "Yeah" and dropped to one knee, running the beam along a joint in the metal decking. I found a Phillips screw and said, "Get back, I'm going to have a look at what's under this steel deck."

"Aren't you going to ground the plate, first?"

"Negative," I replied. "Not even Gordon would have bothered with booby traps this far inside the system.

We've got about eight or ten feet of dangerously shorted junk between us and the outer wall. I don't think anyone could ever get this far in without killing himself or causing the whole system to self-destruct."

"You said something about your, ah, puppet master wanting us to destroy everything. Why can't he simply push a button and do it himself?"

"Not unless he has to," I said. "A naughty child might destroy his HO set before letting Daddy find the dirty pictures hidden in the box cars. But I imagine he'd rather destroy Daddy!"

I unscrewed the last of the four fasteners holding the square of decking in place and gingerly lifted it. I peered down and smiled, "That takes care of the unexplained power. Gordon must have worked on a submarine somewhere."

"Batteries?" asked Linda, peering over my shoulder at the heavy-duty storage cells running under the deck. They were wired parallel.

I said, "Good ones. Drawing a constant trickle charge from the municipal power and by hidden induction coils and storing enough to jolt hell out of things without a detectable drain on the system!"

"You mean it's like that thing your friend had near a power line?"

"Either that or a deeply buried cable running to the generating plant and pulling off a steady but barely noticeable voltage. Gordon built things in duplicate, triplicate, and was confusing in other ways. God knows why he did it in the first place. But he did."

"Then you now know how to disconnect this whole thing?"

"Sure, but why bother? I'd only be alerting the murderer and possibly wiping a lot of tapes we might want to use at his trial."

"But if he can still control everything in here—"

"What's to control? That blonde behind the bulkhead? I don't think she's programmed for karate, and there's nothing else in here that moves."

"But if you leave him in control of all that machinery outside—"

"Shutting down this plant wouldn't do any good. I'm sure he or she has the master override somewhere else. Your homicidal washing machine may not be wired through this junk here at all, as a matter of fact."

"You mean the secret controls could be in any house in the valley?"

"If the signal pulses are really sent through the power circuits the way Bradshaw Spinner suggests," I answered. "If that's the way it's being done, Spinner's at the head of my list. But his house is about the one place around here that's *not* hooked in to the system." Then I stared thoughtfully at the battery banks at my feet and mused, "At least, Spinner *says* he's not getting his power from the central plant."

"Ross! You don't mean to suggest it could be Brad!"

"Why not? He's got the brains for playing mad scientist. Got the messianic complex, too. Spinner conceived and executed the original idea of Cybernia. Isn't it possible he's got a thing about letting other kids play with his toys?"

"It *can't* be Bradshaw Spinner! I won't *let* it be Bradshaw Spinner!"

"What are you going to do? Hold your breath until you get your way?"

"I'm going to prove it's someone else! What about Marvin Greenspan, for instance? He's living in Gordon's house, you know!"

"Okay. And he's on the City Council. Who else do you want me to hang it on?"

"What about Sam Couver? He's the acting mayor! Maybe that's what he wanted all the time, and there's that thing about him having a Dutch name and—"

"Okay. He's a mad Jackson White who wants to kill all the summer people. I'll keep him in mind. Emily Drukker sounds good, too. She knows how to run a key punch, and her uncle did sign Gordon's death certificate. Maybe Emily caught her secret lover cheating on her with a robot and ran him down with a lawn mower or maybe Gordon's still

alive and the fingerprint check was some sinister plot engineered by a lost tribe of Indians who want to take back Manhattan Island or—"

"Stop it!" pouted Linda, dropping into a Jersey Dutch accent. "I don't like it when you fun me like that, mister!"

"That's pretty good," I said. "Didn't you say you were from Ohio originally?"

"It's not hard," she answered. "You just pretend you're Arte Johnson on 'Laugh In,' and instead of saying, 'Verry interesting,' you try to talk like a hill woman from the Piney Woods. There's a dab of Elizabethan in it, too. I told Emily one time she probably sounded more like the original Lady Macbeth than Judith Anderson. She thought I was funning her."

"Let's try Greenspan on for size again," I mused. "I like that bit about him having access to any secret keyboards Gordon might have hidden in his house or garage. But I don't think old Marv's up on cybernetics, and he *was* trapped in the input room with us when the system went nuts the other night."

"So was Bradshaw Spinner, and you said yourself his house was cut off from the rest of the valley!"

"He's got a nice view, though. From up on that ridge you can see everything down here, and he has one hell of a telescope on his roof!"

"It's an astronomical refractive telescope," Linda objected. "It's too powerful to focus on anything less than eight or ten miles away. Besides, it's mounted wrong."

"So he's got a smaller scope. I remember an Army post I was at one time down in Kentucky. The post commander used to monitor the whole place from his picture window. Made it hell to read a comic book on interior guard."

"Anyone could have a smaller telescope," Linda objected. "Besides, I don't care what you say, those electric eyes up in the cupola must be doing *something* aside from telling the street lamps it's getting dark."

I didn't want to start up with that again. So I put the deck panel back in place and ran the flashlight beam around some more. I found a slab-sided component and said, "This looks like the guts of an NCR decoder. It's

wired in series with input elements made by Honeywell and Burroughs and—sweet Santa Barranza—an IBM alphabet reader! That might explain how it can switch from one code to another. I don't know what Gordon had in mind, but it seems to work in a spooky sort of way. What do you suppose this cathode tube's doing here in the dark?"

I touched a switch gingerly, and the cathode tube flashed an illuminated readout at me. It said, "PUT DOWN THAT BOTTLE AND GET BACK TO WORK, YOU LAZY SON OF A BITCH!"

"Someone's watching us!" Linda gasped.

I flicked the switch again, got the same readout, and said, "No, it's just a freaky substitute for a string around the finger. Gordon had an odd sense of humor, and he knew himself better than most alcoholics. The cathode tube waited until I failed to do something it was trying to remind me to do, and then the computer nudged me."

"The illuminated message changed to, "DON'T JUST STAND THERE, YOU DIRTY OLD DRUNK. I'M GOING TO BOOT YOU IN THE TAIL IF YOU DON'T STOP SCREWING AROUND!"

I walked over to the desk, switched on the electric typewriter, and wrote, "THE QUICK BROWN FOX JUMPED OVER THE LAZY DOG."

"THAT'S BETTER," said the cathode tube.

"I don't get it," said Linda.

"Gordon needed to be nagged," I replied. "So naturally he was nagged by automation."

A male voice suddenly shouted at us from the darkness, sending a wave of tingles through the hairs on the back of my neck as it called, "What the hell's going on down there and— My God! There's a *body* down there!"

I led the way back to the mirrored room and waved the flashlight beam up into Marvin Greenspan's startled eyes as I called, "Welcome, my young frand! I am Count Dracula. I vant your blawd!"

"Is that you, MacLean? What's going on, and who's the naked lady?"

"That's no lady. That's a robot. Linda and I are wandering around in an electronic crypt. Care to join us?"

"We're having a council meeting," said Greenspan. "I just came to take a leak and almost fell in this goddamn hole you cut in the floor. Why the hell didn't you tell somebody, for God's sake? I thought you were supposed to be in New York!"

"Couldn't find a place to park. What time is it?"

"About eight. How long you been wandering around down there?"

"Longer than I thought. You want to give us a hand, Marv? I'll boost Linda, and you grab her hands, okay?"

Greenspan helped us up out of the hole. By this time he'd been joined by Couver, Bradshaw Spinner, and another council member named Payne.

I asked why they'd decided to meet so early, and Greenspan pointed at Couver and said, "Don't ask me. Sam's the early bird around here."

The acting city manager shot me an odd look and said, "We'd better put something over that hole before someone breaks his neck. I want to see you, MacLean. Let's go in my office for a minute."

Linda started to follow, but Couver said, "I'd like to be alone with MacLean for a moment, Linda. If you don't mind."

She shrugged and told me she'd wait for me in the council chamber with the others. I said, "As long as everyone's up, I'd rather you did something for me, doll. You know the card storage banks in the comptroller's office? I wonder if you'd run over to the data processing center with them and get us a readout on every contractor that worked on building this place fifteen years ago."

Linda shot Couver a look, and he said, "Go ahead, Linda. I don't trust the town's DPS anymore either."

I followed him inside his office and recognized the heavyset man seated near Couver's desk. It was Tony Lamont.

Couver said, "This is Ross MacLean, Agent Lamont. He's the man I told you about."

Tony shot me a warning look as he got up to take my hand. I shook his hamlike paw and, pretending I was even dumber than I was, took a seat across the desk from Couver. The latter started to say, "Agent Lamont's with the Federal—"

But Tony cut him off with, "No details, please. Officially I'm not here, Mr. Couver."

"I understand," said Couver uncertainly.

Tony Lamont smiled innocently at me and said, "Is there some place we can talk privately, Mr. ah, MacLean?"

"My car, if it's still there. I don't think it's bugged."

"You've been seeing too many movies," laughed Lamont, motioning toward the door with his massive jaw as he lied, "We do much less of that than most people imagine."

I knew he was full of shit. But I didn't think Tony wanted me to tell Couver that everything we said was being recorded by a certain gadget the federal man had inside his double-breasted jacket.

Sam Couver said he'd be with the others when and if we needed him, and Tony and I went out to the car. He waited until I'd unhooked the jump wire and switched off the engine before he said, "Okay, Ross, what the hell's going on up here?"

"Your supervisor *did* find our conversation interesting?"

"Not officially. You understand, Ross, that anything you want to tell me is purely voluntary on your part?"

We go through this all the time.

I said, "I'm just a super patriot at heart, Tony. Besides, some son of a bitch has been trying to murder me."

"Murder's not a federal crime. But we're sort of interested in what you said about unlimited electrical power. Is there any possibility there's an installation hidden somewhere in these hills that the Atomic Energy Commission might be interested in?"

Now one thing I've learned about working with the Bureau is that you do not, repeat, do not lie to Uncle. On the other hand, I knew I was never in this world to un-

scramble the electrical circuits of a whole town in anything less than a hundred years. So I said, "I'm not sure, Tony. The guy who wired this valley seems to be dead, and they throw power around like it's going out of style. They've wired in surplus stuff from the Defense Department, and the tax records going back fifteen years may be a little strange."

"There's nothing in this for IRS," snapped Tony Lamont. "I happen to know unofficially that the Cybernia Corporation's books are kosher. Ditto every member of the corporation and every resident who's moved in within the last quarter."

I shot him a knowing look and said, "Unofficially, huh? I didn't know you guys spied on the Internal Revenue Service, Tony."

Lamont shrugged and said, "Why not? Don't they spy on us?"

I thought a moment, wondering if he'd recorded that last crack. Then I said, "That leaves us with a nut then. You know who Bradshaw Spinner is?"

"The old goat who keeps writing us letters about trading in our Thomsons for the more pragmatecnical Uzzi machine pistol? Yeah, I know about him. He was on the cover of *Time* a while back."

"The man's a genius," I said. "If anyone could build an atomic power plant on his own, he'd be it."

"Spinner has top security clearance," objected Lamont. "He does a lot of work for the Defense Department, and they sort of like to know about people who suggest preventive wars from time to time."

"He thinks dropping the Bomb would be pragmatecnical?"

"No. He wants the Air Force to drop tons of paper money, railroad tickets, and Soviet exit visas all over Eastern Europe. He claims he knows how to get around Russian radar and says no Communist government could survive the confusion."

"What government could? Didn't you tell him we *need* the Cold War, Tony?"

"I didn't tell him anything. I just checked with a few

people, unofficially, of course. His patriotism's unquestionable. We're not supposed to worry about anyone's mental stability. Congressmen are sensitive. Of course, if you could prove Bradshaw Spinner was a *queer* . . ."

"He says he's not," I replied. "Could you bust him if he liked rosy-cheeked boys?"

"No. But we could take away his security clearance, and he'd have to let the Defense Department build four-wheeled jeeps."

"Then you don't really care if he kills me?"

"Not officially."

"What about unofficially?"

"Depends on what you think we ought to know about, Ross."

I told him what I wanted to know about the power grid of the town, and he said, "I'll have to ask my supervisor, Ross. You understand that for the record I don't even know you?"

Yeah, he'd do it. I might never know what he found, but if there were any unknown power sources, communication lines, or secret tunnels I hadn't uncovered, they were going to be uncovered damned fast, albeit unofficially.

I wondered, as Tony left me to return to Sam Couver's office, if the Bureau ever did anything officially.

By that afternoon Linda had a typed list of every contractor who'd even bid on the construction of Cybernia. I had her put Emily Drukker to work on another list, from the yellow pages, of every contractor within reasonable range.

Meanwhile, Tony Lamont had vanished from human ken. Sam Couver told me he'd gone back to Newark, and maybe he had. But there was some sort of power breakdown that afternoon, even though all the electricity seemed to be on. I noticed the maintenance crew seemed to have grown a bit before they started digging here and there for what they said was a short in the power grid. I wondered what Lamont had told Sam Couver all those agents were looking for.

I checked out Linda's apartment, finding everything in order and the broken window repaired. When I called the maintenance department, a man named Fred told me he had no idea who had replaced the broken pane.

As I was crossing the mall, one of the boys who'd helped us at the lake came up to me. It was the one in the Cub Scout shirt, Chuck Howard. He was still wearing the Vietnamese Palm of Gallantry, and he asked me if I wanted to see the bomb he and the other kids had found. I started to shake my head. Then I asked, "A bomb, Chuck? What kind of a bomb?"

"It looks like it was dropped from an airplane," offered the boy. "It's all silvery, and I'll bet some jet dropped it by mistake, only it didn't go off and—"

"Where'd you find it, Chuck?"

He waved towards the south wall of the valley and said, "Up there in the woods. It's sort of half-buried in some leaves, and my mother told me not to fool around with leaves because last year I did and I caught poison ivy and—"

"Is it still there?"

"Well, sure, you don't think I'd go and bring home a airplane bomb, do you? You should have seen the fit my mother had over this little old snake. It was only a garter snake. We learned about snakes from Mr. Wilson, and he said you didn't have to worry unless a snake had a head shaped like an arrowhead. Only my mother made me throw it out anyway and—"

"I'd sure like to see this bomb, Chuck."

"You would? Wow! Let's go! I know right where it is!"

We got in my car, and I followed the boy's directions until we were quite close to the spot where Linda's car had skidded off the road.

Chuck Howard said the "bomb" was just behind some shrubbery on the higher slope. I stopped the car and followed as he babbled about secret Soviet overflights and flying saucers. Then he pointed down at a four-foot cylinder partly hidden by Virginia creeper and said, "There it is, mister. Is that stuff poison ivy? I sure hope it's not poison ivy because Mother says I'm allergic to it or something."

I knelt in the ground cover, after assuring Chuck it was harmless, and examined the steel cylinder. I had to roll it over to read the label attached to the pet cock at one end. The boy said, "I'll bet you're defusing it, huh? I know all about bombs, and I bet you had to defuse them a lot in Vietnam."

I opened the pet cock. The cylinder was empty. Chuck Howard said, "Is it going to blow up?"

I said, "It's not a bomb, Chuck. It's a gas bottle."

"Oh, boy! Poison nerve gas?"

"Freon," I said grimly. "They use Freon to freeze things. Can you keep a secret, Chuck?"

"Wow! Sure! Is it a military secret?"

"Sort of. I don't want anyone but us to know about this for a while, huh?"

"Not even grownups?"

"Especially not even grownups."

I groped about in the tangled ivy for a time before I found what I was looking for. The boy said, "Wow, is that a snake?" as I yanked a couple of feet of black rubber tubing into view. I assured him it was heavy-duty hose, and he asked what it was doing there.

It was a good question.

On the face of it, I was supposed to believe some nut had hidden up here in the bushes until Linda's car came around the bend and then shot a bottle of expanding Freon into the road bed, freezing the rain water into a hundred feet of glare ice.

But it wouldn't scan.

Refrigeration's not my line, but there were glaring holes in the idea. Someone would have to know which road we were coming in by, lie in wait behind the shrubbery in the rain, zap a few thousand cubic feet of Freon through a tube that would probably burst from the pressure if the rubber wasn't frozen brittle enough to break first, then freeze a few hundred square feet of warm concrete to zero centigrade in less than a minute.

No way.

"Mister," the boy was saying, "I'm not allowed to lie to my mother."

"I don't think you should either, Chuck."

"Well, can I tell her about the bomb if I tell her it's a military secret?"

I nodded and said, "As long as you ask her not to tell the other grownup ladies."

Mrs. Howard would probably think the kid was just telling her one of the usual childhood fantasies when he confided in her about his bomb. But with any luck she might pass the story around.

Someone was trying to sucker me.

I wanted him to think he'd succeeded, until I figured what was going on!

In spy stories a secret agent can walk away with the plans of a battleship. In real life the working drawings of a car take up a couple of drawers. The complete plans involved in laying out Cybernia occupied an eight-foot-high steel chest in the maintenance office. And that was only the small scale charts and blueprints they needed to do the routine chores in keeping a planned community manicured. They didn't have more than floor plans for most of the houses.

The head of the department was called Shep Conway. He was a grizzled pro who'd been with the Cybernia Corporation almost from its conception. It was Conway who told me a lot of the working drawings didn't match the actual construction.

"We had all these long hairs, see?" he explained. "They were full of beans about how they were going to set the world on its ear in them days. We'd no sooner get started on something than one of them would have a better idea, and right in the middle of putting in one gizmo, they'd make us change everything around."

"I'm really interested in that heating grid under the

roadways and walks," I said. "Are you sure every section's heated with electrical resistance cable?"

"Sure. Wouldn't work the other way."

"What other way?"

"Copper tubing. We tried that first. Idea was to circulate hot water under the concrete and keep the slabs just warm enough to keep the snow from sticking. Works okay indoors. But it get's fluky as hell when you try and expand it to take in a whole road net. You waste a hell of a lot of heat at one end, and the water freezes and bursts the concrete at the other. Besides, the copper tubing was running a mint."

"But you did install some copper tubing?"

"Just as an experiment. I told you it didn't work."

"Yeah. What part of the road net still has the old copper tubing under it?"

"None of it. First winter the tubing froze and made a hell of a mess."

"You tore it all out?"

"Not exactly. We hadn't laid that much of it. We just carried away the loose rubble and repaved the whole mess with the new concrete heated by electricity."

"Over on the south side of the valley?"

"Yeah. How'd you know?"

"Lucky guess. But in other words, there *are* stretches of road over there with the old tubing still in place under the new surfacing?"

"Guess so. But it wouldn't function anymore. Tubing's busted in a dozen places, and even if it wasn't, there's no steam to pipe through it."

"But what if you tried to run hot or cold liquid through from one of the nearby homes?"

"Leak all over the place. I told you the pipes are busted up."

"Okay. What about steam or gas?"

"I guess you'd get some heat. But why bother? The electric elements do the job already."

I asked, "Any of those houses over there unsold, or at least not occupied, at the moment?"

"I wouldn't know. You'd have to ask the sales department."

I thanked him and went back to Town Hall.

Emily Drukker had prepared the list of local contractors. I thanked her and said, "Now I'd like you to type up a third list. I want the names of every contractor in the area who is *not* on file as one of the corporation's subcontractors."

"How do I program that, Mr. MacLean?"

"With a pencil and paper," I said. "I don't want what you're doing to wind up on tape."

Linda was working at her console, and she glanced up at me with a slightly puzzled frown. I said, "What's the matter? Do you want our secret pal to know we're checking this out?"

"No. But I can't figure out what you're after."

"A list of names to pay a few calls on," I replied. "I know the contractors on file will have nothing to say. But if Emily finds a contractor who actually did some of the work on Cybernia fifteen years ago and if that same contractor is not on record in the corporation's computerized files—"

"He'll possibly remember something else. Like an underground power line or two?"

"You're learning, kitten. What do you say to some lunch?"

Leaving the stolid Emily at her console table, Linda and I went across to the mall to a luncheonette. Over coffee and danish I filled her in on what I'd learned about the buried copper tubing and how someone had gotten very cute with the empty Freon cylinder.

"Wouldn't it have been all too easy to dispose of the Freon thing?" she asked.

I nodded and said, "Of course. I was supposed to find it."

"Okay, I'll bite. Why?"

"To keep me from finding something else, of course! Who do we see about empty houses up in the area?"

"I'm sure Marvin Greenspan would know. He's in

charge of sales for the corporation, and I could ask him to—"

"I wish you wouldn't," I cut in. "There must be a sales chart in his office. Think you could get him out of there long enough for me to take a peek?"

"Don't have to. He's in New York. Marv only sells real estate as a sideline. His main income is from a job with some bank."

"So what are we waiting for? Finish your coffee and let's go."

"Consider it finished." She smiled.

I stopped the car and said, "This must be the place all right. You damned near fell through the roof when you skidded on the road about here."

We got out and looked down at the Williamsburg Colonial below the steep embankment carved from the solid rock of the valley wall. A series of steps led down from the roadside mail box, and I helped Linda descend them, warning her to be careful about the loose rail. The bank was rusty brown rock, and I mused aloud about iron mines again as we were going down the steps. Linda said, "I asked Emily about that, darling. She says most of the iron mines here in the Ramapos were open pits. She remembers tramping these hills as a girl, and she's sure there were no mines in this particular valley."

"*If* she's telling us the truth."

"Why should she lie?"

"Beats me. Why should Bradshaw Spinner say there were open shafts in the area if there aren't any?"

We walked across the backyard, noting it had been recently mowed by the maintenance men, and then Linda stiffened and said, "Ross! Up there on the chimney, *watching* us!"

I looked up at the photoelectric cell staring blankly down from its installation on the whitewashed brick chimney and said, "It's an electric eye, all right. But it's facing the blank wall of rock and— Do you see what I see?"

Linda followed my gaze until she'd spotted the tiny square of glass halfway up the bank and said, "Why, it looks like a mirror. A little makeup mirror from some woman's purse!"

"The photoelectric cell faces it," I said. "From the path out front or the road above, the photo cell's hidden from view. Yet if it's really lined on that mirror, it's picking up light from the other side of the valley!"

"But why? What does it do?"

"Beats me. Let's go inside and have a look."

Linda had gotten a key from Greenspan's office with a little assistance at breaking and entering desk drawers on my part.

I opened the rear door and reeled back from the acrid stench inside. Linda gagged and gasped, "What's that awful smell?"

"Scorched plastic," I replied, opening and shutting the door to air the joint out a bit. I said, "Looks like this place was set up to self-destruct, but something went wrong. That's why the phony Freon cylinder was left in the woods up above. Our secret pal didn't dare come this close to the scene in person, and when this empty house refused to burn for some reason, he tried to divert attention from it."

We went inside, and Linda said, "Glugh, what a mess!"

Greenspan's records showed the house had been lived in by a family who sold it back to the corporation when they moved to the West Coast. I doubted they'd ever sell it to anyone now, even with some interior decoration.

The wall-to-wall nylon carpeting had melted to glassy goo in regular strips. The walls seemed to be covered with peeling foam the color of overdone, toasted marshmallows. I snapped off a brittle chunk and said, "Fire-resistant paint. It bubbles up and smothers flame with carbon dioxide."

"Is that why the house didn't burn?"

"Doubt it. It helped. But anything burns if you cook it long enough. Let's take a look in the cellar."

It was even worse down there. Glassy strands of melted plastic hung like cobwebs from the expanded steel mesh of the overhead. The floor was covered with a filthy black scum that seemed to consist of burned paper, scorched insulation, and ink-black water.

I said, "That explains it. There must be a leak in the roof, and the rain's been soaking things down all summer. It was raining cats and dogs the other day, remember?"

"Roofs aren't supposed to leak in Cybernia."

"This one did. It must have given our secret pal a nasty turn when his preprogrammed arson attempt fizzled out. Let's take a look at the circuit breakers."

There were no circuit breakers. Oh, the box was there. But someone had replaced the cut-offs with copper bus bars capable of conducting a thunderstorm into the house wiring. Just *why* the house had been wired for self-destruction was still up in the air.

But not for long. The Freon tanks were half-buried under a soggy mass of partially burned newspapers at the rear of the cellar. I sniffed at a wad of paper and said, "Soaked in paraffin. But the rain loused it up."

There were eight Freon tanks connected to a manifold. The manifold lead to a valve controlled by the same sort of black box Cybernia used to turn on its lawn sprinklers. There was a frayed length of burned-out wire dangling near the black box and I said, "That's a point our pal overlooked. The control wires were already conducting a charge when he zapped the high voltage into the house wires. Naturally *they* melted first and broke the circuit. End of arson attempt in soggy house."

"Then you can't trace the control wire to its source?"

"Not burned all to hell like that. The signal to release the refrigerant must have been sent as soon as they spotted your car turning left from the fire road. It takes time to cool off a mass of concrete and blacktop enough to freeze rain water."

"But how could they have known I'd take that route?"

"Don't you usually?"

"Yes. But they couldn't have predicted the rain!"

"Come on, it rains at least twice a week up here in the Ramapos! Sooner or later they had to have you on a wet road if they watched you long enough!"

"That electric eye on the chimney?"

"I'll have to think about that. I can't see what sort of beam we could have broken between the back of the house and the rocks out back. The road's well above the chimney and— Hey, remember me saying the railing along the steps looked wobbly? That was no railing, that was the pipe taking the Freon up to the road bed. They must have replaced the original wrought iron rail with that crude-looking pipe job. I must say it's sloppy workmanship."

"Ross," Linda suddenly said, "I just thought of something. It's not *you* they're trying to kill. It's *me!* It has to be me! They couldn't have possibly installed all those booby traps since the time you arrived!"

"Let's say they're after both of us," I suggested. "But you've got a point. Both you and Ed Morton were wired for execution if Cybernia's electronic god decided you were transgressing against his omnipotence. What will you bet he's laid plans for every official and supervisor in Cybernia?"

"You're kidding!"

"I wish I was. But I'm beginning to see the way this cat's mind works. He and his automation are running things just the way he wants them to run, and as long as you human slobs behave, it's okay for you to go on breathing. Let any one of you refuse to obey an electronic whim, and Jehovah throws His thunderbolt!"

"Then he can set any house he wants on fire? Make any of our appliances turn on us? Electrocute us by sending a

charge through an innocent metal object? Anytime he feels like it?"

"I imagine he might have to wait for you to line up with one of his better mousetraps. But you've got the general idea. This particular setup may not have been intended for you in particular. It was simply set up to kill *anyone* driving on the road above on a rainy day. Suffice to say, they'd have to annoy our secret pal a bit to qualify. He's had fifteen years or so to learn the ropes and a good two of solo godmanship. But he's only killed a few people we know of."

"Let's get out of here. This place is giving me the willies."

As we were leaving, she asked, "It does begin to look like Bradshaw Spinner, doesn't it?"

I said, "Hell, it has to be"

"But you can't prove it?"

"I can't even accuse him without coming across as some sort of nut! Can't you just hear what the police would say if we went to them with a story about being pursued by a mad scientist?"

"With automated robot ladies yet! It does sound awfully wild. But dammit, darling, we *did* find a robot lady, and the town *is* automated and—"

"So how does he do it?"

"You mean Brad? He must have these secret controls and—"

"The man lives halfway out of town. His house is off city property. He's not even connected with the municipal power system. Aside from that, he's a respected member of the scientific community and independently wealthy. You really expect a jury to believe he's been killing people by remote control unless you can show them how?"

Linda thought about that. Then she said, "I guess it's up to us to show them how then."

"It's not that simple," I replied. "While we're finding out how our pragmatecnic messiah plays with lightning, we've got to make sure none of it hits us!"

Later that evening I began to wish I'd kept my mouth shut about lightning. Linda and I were having dinner at Bradshaw Spinner's house on the ridge, along with the Greenspans and the Couvers, when one of those godawful electrical storms North Jersey is famous for came rolling across the Ramapos.

Sam Couver's wife gleeped when the first bolt slammed down out of the rain-swept sky. But old Brad at the head of the table smiled and said, "Please don't be alarmed. We're quite safe. Our horrendous mountain weather was anticipated when we planned Cybernia. Every street lamp in the valley has a lightning rod connected to it as have all the buildings, of course."

"What about this one?" asked Marvin Greenspan uneasily.

Spinner laughed and said, "I *enjoy* electrical storms. But naturally I respect them, too. This ridge is rather exposed, but the house is protected by a sophisticated set of lightning arresters. One can't be too careful with all the high-voltage equipment I work with."

He shot Sam Couver a thoughtful look and added, "By the way, your friends from the FBI dug quite a trench down the slope, Sam. All the way to bed rock. What did you tell them they'd find?"

Couver looked blank and said, "FBI, Brad? I don't know anyone from the FBI!"

"Corps of Engineers then," said Spinner. "Nobody works that hard without orders from the federal government, even if they were wearing Shep Conway's coveralls. Did they tell you they didn't find any buried cables, Sam?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," protested Couver.

I took a sip of wine, swallowed, and said, "I think I can explain, Brad. Unofficially they were looking for your connection with the power grid down in the valley."

The old man's eyes met mine, naked steel glinting behind their friendly twinkle, as he said, "Oh? Bishop to queen's square to cover a pawn?"

"Nobody likes to lose a pawn unless he has to."

For a long unwinking moment our eyes locked. Then he laughed and said, "Consider that particular pawn out of danger then. But tell me, haven't you rather exposed your ah, bishop?"

Sarah Greenspan said, "What are you two talking about, a game of chess?"

I said, "Sort of." Then, not taking my eyes from Spinner's smiling face, I said, "My bishop's guarded by a blue queen, Brad."

"Ah, you *do* play fairy chess?"

"I'm familiar with the game."

Sam Couver laughed uneasily and said, "Let us in on it, will you? What are you guys talking about? What the hell is fairy chess?"

Spinner turned to him still smiling and explained, "It's purely heterosexual, Sam. Sometimes when ordinary chess loses its savor, we devoted followers of the game spice it up with what we call a blue queen. An unknown factor added to the board in the form of an extra piece or two, painted blue."

"Sounds complicated."

"Oh, it is. You see, Sam, either player can move the blue queen when it's his turn." He looked at me again and asked, "By the way, Ross, who's move is it?"

"Yours, I think."

There was a sizzling flash of lightning, and Marvin Greenspan gasped, "Wow! That was close!"

I don't know what would have happened next if Sam Couver hadn't said to me, "By the way, Ross. Emily Drukker told me to ask if you wanted the names of contractors who've gone out of business."

I could have killed him.

Bradshaw Spinner asked, "What's this about contractors?"

Couver answered, "Some idea Ross here had about the building contracts we have on file."

"I didn't know Emily was working on that," mused Spinner.

I said, "You wouldn't. She's not using a keypunch. Mind if I use your phone?"

"Go right ahead," he said. "It's over there by the fireplace."

I excused myself from the table and walked to the phone. Linda was quick enough to start another conversation. But I was certain they could hear me at the table as I got the hill girl's apartment and said, "Emily, this is Ross MacLean. I want you to listen carefully and do exactly as I say. Got that?"

Emily answered, "Sure, Mr. MacLean. What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to go right to your car this instant and drive to your uncle's place on King's Road."

"You mean right now? What do you want me to tell Oom Piet, Mr. MacLean?"

"Nothing. I just want you to go there and stay there until you hear from me."

"You don't want me to come to work in the morning?"

"No. I'll tell you when it's all right."

"All right? Is there somethin' wrong, Mr. MacLean?"

"Yes. I can't talk about it now. Just trust me and do as you're told, okay?"

Emily Drukker said she would, and I hung up. As I rejoined the others at the dinner table, Bradshaw Spinner

raised his wine glass in a mocking toast and murmured, "I like a man who thinks on his feet, Ross. But you said it was my move."

"Pawn had to be covered," I answered. "Besides you've had a long time to set up, and we're playing on your board, you know."

"You're catching on fast," the old man muttered dryly.

Marvin Greenspan shook his head and said, "Boy, you guys are sure speaking in riddles tonight!"

"We understand one another," said Bradshaw Spinner.

"Perfectly," I agreed, meeting his unwinking gaze.

I noticed he wasn't smiling anymore.

A gust of wind rattled the picture windows, and Sarah Greenspan said, "I'd better call the baby sitter and tell her we're going to be a little late." Then she frowned at Bradshaw Spinner and asked, "Is it all right to use the phone?"

"Of course," he said.

She said, "I meant with the lightning and all, Brad. I've heard it's dangerous to talk on the telephone in a thunderstorm."

The old man shot me a sardonic look and said, "I assure you it's perfectly safe, my dear. Ask Ross here if you don't believe me."

I said, "The lines are protected by lightning rods and circuit breakers, Sarah. The worst that could happen is a line going dead."

As she got up from the table, Spinner asked me, "Have you really so much faith in Ma Bell? I was rather surprised you trusted yourself to my private line just now."

I shrugged and said, "I doubt very much that anyone would be stupid enough to tamper with the Bell System, Brad. Ma Bell may not offer the best telephone service in the world, but she'd take quite an interest in any of her equipment electrocuting someone. You'd have an army of Western Electric technicians tracing the circuits if anything like that happened."

He stared unwaveringly for a full five seconds before he said, "I take it you've ruled out the telephone lines?"

"I think I can," I replied evenly. "Cybernia's phones

are owned outright by Bell and serviced by Western Electric. I don't think even Gregory Gordon could have spliced into the phone in such a way that none of Ma Bell's linemen would have known about it for fifteen years."

The mention of Gordon's name brought a grimace of distaste to Sam Couver's face. He said, "I wouldn't put anything past that crazy old drunk, Ross! I don't know if you're aware of it or not, but we had a closer look at that . . . that love toy of his. It was pretty disgusting. You know that robot was capable of, well, going all the way?"

"What robot?" asked his wife.

Couver said, "I told you about it, hon. That Disneyland lady that Gordon had hidden inside the computer. Ross here explained the way it works. But I kid you not, it's frightening to think of a damned *machine* capable of staging a sex orgy!"

"I think I'll have to quibble with you, Sam," said Spinner, smiling once more as he pontificated. "Technically the word *orgy* means a group of people engaged in multiple sexual activity. Since there were only two partners and only one of them was human, I don't think you could say it was an orgy."

"Masturbation?" asked Marvin Greenspan, getting a laugh out of everyone but Linda, Spinner, and myself.

Sam Couver wiped his face with a napkin and said, "I guess it is funny in a sick sort of way. But we certainly can't have that sort of thing getting around. As a matter of fact, I'm going to propose getting rid of the whole silly mess at the next council meeting."

"What about the municipal records?" asked Spinner. "We'll have a terrible mess on our hands if we shut down the computer. Wouldn't it be better if we let Ross pull its fangs without losing all the data sorted in the system?"

"I've suggested moving the tapes and punch cards to the data processing company across town," I replied. "Not that I think there's much of value on those garbled tapes in any case."

"You don't think Gordon's memory banks have accidentally wiped anything?"

"Not accidentally," I answered grimly. "But I doubt the

other computer system will uncover anything incriminating at this late date."

"Incriminating?" said Sam Couver. "I know Gordon's mechanical monster has been getting out of hand, but what's this jazz about incrimination? Are you suggesting all these freak accidents have been an attempt to cover up some hanky-panky in our bookkeeping?"

"Hard to say what's been covered up," I said. "Some people like to chisel a few pennies. Others like to play God. I imagine we'll find it's a little of both. When and if we unscramble the overprints and check a few mysterious wipes."

Marvin Greenspan said, "I don't think you'll find any irregularities in the books, MacLean. I happen to know the corporation's records have been audited every year by outside tax consultants."

"Using your computer system in Town Hall?"

"Not always. I think duplicate punch cards and tapes were made available. And, of course, all our company checks were recorded by our New York bank. Then, too, we've been cleared year after year by IRS. I don't see how any serious shortages could have been covered, even by a man who builds his own mistresses!"

"There wouldn't have to be serious shortages," I replied, "I think I told you about the guy we caught swiping small change with a computer."

"You mean somebody could have been dipping in the petty cash all these years?"

"It wouldn't be that petty, if one or two cents were diverted from every check your automated payroll system handled. You've got quite a staff here in Cybernia. And let's not forget the monthly payments from your residents. You've got a lot of billing, and an overcharge of a few cents adds up in time."

"Hey, those mortgages are underwritten by an outside bank and recorded with the Federal Housing Administration!"

"I'm not talking about mortgage payments. You sell them power, lights, and water, don't you?"

"Sure. At damned low rates!"

"All the more reason your average resident wouldn't notice a slight overcharge. You've got no meter reading on a house-to-house basis. Shep Conway tells me the metering and billing is handled guess where. But no matter how I try, I can't seem to find a storage bank in that system of yours that has a damned thing to say about who gets power and water. Yet it sends a bill every month. Curious, isn't it?"

"I think I can explain that," said Sam Couver. "A couple of years ago the computer decided to prorate the billing, based on the average amount of water and electricity used by our residents."

"The computer decided it?" I asked, staring at Bradshaw Spinner.

Couver said, "Well, sure. You know the damned thing's started to think for itself. Isn't that why Ed Morton called you in in the first place?"

"Ed asked me to find out why it was *acting* like it was starting to think for itself," I corrected. "He didn't mind it telling him what sort of fish to stock or how often to mow the lawns. But when your adding machine starts to hire and fire people behind your back or issue checks you've signed without letting you in on it, it gets to be a bit much."

"Adding machine?" questioned Bradshaw Spinner, "Isn't that an oversimplification, Ross? A computer is hardly a mere adding machine, you know."

"I know nothing of the kind," I insisted. "There's not as much difference between a desk calculator and Univac as the average layman thinks. Oh, computers can run multiple variables or even draw a three-dimensional picture from a set of plans. But when you get right down to the nitty-gritty, a computer is only a glorified abacus. It can give you the square root of the known interstellar universe in a few minutes. But it does not, repeat, does not have the ability to countermand a programmed order. Nor does it usually commit murder."

Bradshaw Spinner leaned back, bit the end off a Havana perfecto he must have had sent in from Canada,

and asked, "Have you any proof Ed Morton's death was premeditated murder, automated or otherwise?"

"No," I replied. "None that I could present to a grand jury. The American public's been conditioned to accept computer error as one of those things, like Virus X and the State Department. Nobody questions computer error. Let someone short change them at the supermarket and they howl blue murder. But they never question the right of some department store's black box to bill them for merchandise they never ordered or issue a credit card to a family pet."

"There ought to be a law," said Bradshaw Spinner.

I said, "I'm in complete agreement with you on that, Brad. I don't know why there isn't a law protecting the public against computer error. As Ed Morton and I were saying the night he died, I can't defend myself from a traffic violation by saying it's not my fault—the car made a mistake. Yet people have been robbed, snooped on, erroneously charged with being everything from a bad credit risk to a criminal by some idiotically programmed thinker-tinker. To date I can't remember a single case where the courts decided against the computer."

"Makes you wonder, doesn't it?" asked Spinner, lighting his cigar. He blew a cloud of blue smoke at me and said softly, "A man who, ah, knew which button to push could literally get away with murder, couldn't he?"

He was enjoying himself, I thought. Except for Linda not one person at the dinner party knew what he was doing. Yet he'd as much as confessed to my face, and the hell of it was, he was right! I couldn't think of a shred of evidence I could offer a district attorney unversed in electronic data processing. Hell, *I* still wasn't sure just how he was doing it!

"I think the storm's letting up," said Sarah Greenspan, rejoining us at the table, as a distant drum roll of thunder echoed across the valley. Bradshaw Spinner shook his head and said, "We're only getting the dead eye of the storm, Sarah. I imagine there'll be some more fireworks before morning."

"We'd better get home before it starts up again," said her husband.

There was a murmur of agreement from Sam Couver and his wife.

Bradshaw Spinner smiled across at me and asked, "Will you be spending the night here, Ross? You're welcome to stay, unless you have other plans."

"I've gotten pretty well settled in at the motel in Suffern," I replied, not looking at Linda.

Spinner shrugged and said, "Well, this is hardly a motel. But I did want to show you some new equipment I'd gotten in. You *were* interested in those new fuel cell components I told you about the other night, weren't you?"

"Some other time," I said thinly. "I've got to run Linda home, in any case. Her car's still in the shop and "

"Did you really think I was that crude?" the old man cut in wistfully.

"Why are we stopping?" asked Linda, with a puzzled smile as I cut the ignition and pulled over on the wet shoulder just outside the eastern entrance to the valley.

I said, "We just passed through the photoelectric beam back there, and I told Spinner I was staying in Suffern."

"So?"

"So we're not going to Suffern. But if we were, we'd be around the next bend about now and—"

There was a horrendous bang, and the rain-lashed road ahead was illuminated by a brilliant orange flash. Linda gasped and said, "My God! That bolt must have landed just up the mountain!"

Then her words were drowned out by an express train rumble as the earth vibrated under us. It continued a good thirty seconds before fading away to a few clattering rocks rolling down the slope here and there. I started the car and eased forward, peering through the windshield wiper's arc as I switched on the lights again.

"What was that all about?" Linda asked. And then, as we slowly rounded the curve, her question was answered by the huge pile of earth and rock blocking the road ahead of us.

"It was a landslide!" marveled Linda. "That lightning bolt must have— Oh, no! You don't think . . .?"

"That was no lightning bolt. That was dynamite," I said, adding, "The old bastard must buy his dynamite wholesale."

"You told him you were taking this road!" Linda gasped. "And he must have known there'd be a very few other cars on the road in this storm!"

"He wouldn't chance it that crudely," I objected. "I rehooked the recognition device under the hood, and naturally he has the microwave frequency on tape. I wonder if the planted charge was preprogrammed or if he has to push a button every time."

"It's just too ghastly to believe!" Linda said, shuddering. "If we'd been under there when all that goop slid down the mountain—"

"We'd have been the victims of an unseasonal summer storm," I finished. "But I'm beginning to get the feel of the broken field running it takes to stay alive around the old [illegible]"

"How are we going to get out of here now?" Linda asked.

I said, "We're not," and started to make a U-turn.

Linda said, "We're going *back?* Back where that . . . that madman has us in his power?"

"Relax," I soothed. "With any luck he thinks I'm lying under a couple of tons of mud, and when he tries to kill you—"

"*Me?*" gagged Linda. "You mean I'm next?"

"Probably. But not to worry. I told him I was running you home, remember?"

We approached the photoelectric beam again, and I stopped the car a second time. I asked Linda if she had a mirror in her purse, and she fished out a compact, asking, "Aren't we going to drive around it again?"

"Ground's too soggy," I replied. "Besides, I want to try something new. When I get out, I want you to slide over and take the wheel. Don't drive through the beam until I signal, though."

I got out and, hunching my shoulders against the driving rain, ran over to the photoelectric alarm. I held the mirror out of line while I checked the beam setting. Then I nodded in satisfaction and, holding the mirror in front of the light source, motioned to Linda with my free hand.

She drove through and stopped. I snatched the mirror out of line and ran over to the car, sliding in as Linda made room for me. As I slammed the door, she asked what I'd done. I said, "Fortunately it's an unsophisticated setup. If the photocell and light source had been on opposite sides of the road, we'd have been out of luck. But the whole installation's in one box. The light's bounced off a glorified mirror across the road and back to the same unit, where the photocell picks it up."

"You mean you tricked it with a compact mirror?"

"Sure. It's just a gimmick to impress the customers anyway. If they asked me to set up a foolproof electronic defense for the place . . . Well, never mind. Do you have anything very valuable in your apartment?"

"Just some clothing, books, and records. Why?"

"Not worth the risk of going back for," I said. "I'll buy you a new dress if I'm right about Spinner's next move."

"If you're right? Don't you mean wrong?"

"No. If I'm wrong, your belongings are as safe as your

fair white body. At the moment it's your fair white body I'm trying to protect."

"Where are we going?"

"Town Hall, of course. We'd better park a couple of blocks away and duck between the buildings along the way. With this rain and the darkness I don't think he'll be able to spot us from up there on the ridge."

Linda was silent a moment as I drove back into Cybernia. Then she said, "I hope you know what you're doing, darling. But that damned building seems to be wired for everything but smallpox!"

"It's also the nerve center of Spinner's whole nasty little setup," I replied. "We keep wandering around Cybernia, and sooner or later he's going to kill us. But if I can only jam that whammy machine of his before he goes completely ape . . ."

A police cruiser overtook us, moving fast, with its blinker light revolving. I drew over to the shoulder, half-expecting to be stopped and wondering what I was going to say if I was. But the police car ignored us and continued on its way toward the center of town.

I drove a few blocks further and parked. Then I said, "We're going to get wet, kitten."

"I guess it's better than getting dead," she said wanly.

We got out and hurried toward Town Hall, ignoring the rain as we grew accustomed to being thoroughly soaked to the skin. Up ahead I spotted revolving blinker lights and heard a loud speaker saying, "FIRE, FIRE, FIRE. REPEAT, FIRE. ALL UNITS REPORT TO VICINITY OF SHOPPING UNIT FOUR. REPEAT, SHOPPING UNIT FOUR. A FIRE HAS STARTED ON THE UPPER FLOORS."

"That's the building my apartment's in!" Linda said quite calmly.

I said, "Told you, doll. I imagine the doors will be unlocked by this time. Won't poor old Spinner be surprised when they don't find your body after all?"

"He'll probably be there in his silly little three-wheeled beetle, crying about my poor, charred remains."

"Doubt it," I said. "He's going to be a very busy boy on top of that ridge tonight."

"How does he do it? You said yourself the telephone line is out, and there just don't seem to be any other connections. Could he be using some sort of microwave radio or something?"

"Too risky. Radio signals have this nasty way of winding up in all sorts of places you don't send them. If only I'd had more time . . . But naturally time's the one thing the old goat doesn't want us to have."

"He must be insane! How many people does he think he can murder before someone starts asking questions?"

"Oh, he's got to get caught sooner or later," I said. "But if it's all the same, kitten, I'd just as soon make it before he nails one of us!"

There was a blinding flash of lightning, followed by an almost instantaneous crash of thunder. Linda screamed and fell against me. Then as I steadied her with an arm around her soaking wet shoulder, she said, "Sorry about that. But I was already scared skinny, and that was close!"

"Let's not worry about thunderbolts from real gods," I suggested. "We're almost there, and the one thing we don't have to worry about near Town Hall is a thunderbolt!"

"He must feel like God up there!" The girl shuddered at my side. I didn't shudder. But I was creeped.

I couldn't identify with Bradshaw Spinner. But I could understand him.

Sort of.

After a lifetime spent fighting with Senate committees, Defense Department bureaucrats, and others he considered subnormal, it must have been some consolation to have an entire town he could run the way he thought the world should be run. If only the human residents of Cybernia had jumped every time he pushed the froggy buttons, everything might have worked out just swell.

But people are funny that way. They have this awful habit of doing their own thing, even when you tell them and tell them they should live your pragmatecnic way.

Human beings just won't listen. They insist on driving cars with four wheels and watching "I Love Lucy" reruns,

and above all they seem to want to handle their own money.

So what's a god to do?

Linda broke my chain of thoughts by asking, "Why are they watering the lawns at a time like this? It's raining cats and dogs!"

I blinked in surprise and saw she was right. I hadn't noticed, as wet as I was. But the squishy lawn we were crossing had its sprinkler system going full blast!

"Must be a short circuit somewhere," I said, urging her on as the water came at us both ways. We crossed the lawn, sloshed across the ankle-deep drive behind Town Hall, and ducked in under the overhead of the rear entrance.

There was a different cop on guard, but he recognized us and lowered the shotgun at our approach. He was clad in a black slicker and rubber boots. But he still looked like a half-drowned duck as he sighed, "Boy, this is some cloudburst, isn't it?"

"So why are you wandering around in it?" I asked, pointing up at the overhead with my chin.

The armed guard said, "Heard something around the side a minute ago. Must have been an animal. Raccoons and possums come down from the hills at night around here."

I nodded absently as Linda unlocked the rear door. Then there was a clicking noise, and the cop said, "There it is again."

"Sounded like a magnetic relay," I said, trying to locate the source with my ears. It had been from outside the building, I was sure. But the exact location was up for grabs.

Linda finished unlocking the door and turned around. Then she said, "the lawn decided it had enough, I see."

She was right again. The lawn sprinklers had gone off. The cop said he hadn't noticed they were on in all the rain.

"Takes bare legs to really know the facts of life," I said, grinning. "Keep an eye out and give a yell if anyone shows up, huh? I mean *anyone!*"

"Will do," the cop said. Then he gulped "Jesus!" as another blinding flash illuminated the entire valley, accompanied by a crash of thunder that left our ears ringing.

"There they go again!" said Linda.

The lawn sprinklers were on.

I said, "The storm must be shorting part of the system out."

"But how?" asked the girl. "I thought all the electrical equipment was grounded.

"Let's not wonder about it now. Overwatered grass is the least of our worries. Come on."

Linda reached for a light switch, and I said, "Negative. Let's keep some things to ourselves, huh?"

"I just wanted to see if they still worked."

"They work. Sam Couver ordered the power back on. Not that it matters what anyone orders around here. Gordon's power lines seem to have a mind of their own."

I lead the way to the city manager's office, and Linda told me, with a puzzled frown, she had no key to Sam's door. I said, "Not to worry," and threw a karate kick just under the knob. The door sprang inward on the third try.

"You're getting awfully rugged all of a sudden, aren't you, darling?"

I said, "Muscles are the only advantage I have over Spinner. He lookes like a sucker for a right cross. But that gray matter of his has me worried. I can't afford to spar around with an electronic slugger!"

Squishing over to Couver's desk, I picked up the phone and dialed his home. His wife put him on the phone, and he asked where I was. I said, "In your office. Never mind how. I want you to do me a few favors,"

"What's up?"

"Jehovah's throwing a temper tantrum or about to. You get Shep Conway on the horn and tell him I want Cybernia blacked out. I mean everything, Lights, power, the works. Tell him to shut down the turbines at the plant manually. Switches don't count in this neck of the woods."

"You mean, black out every home in Cybernia?"

"Would you rather rebuild them? The phones will still be in working order, Sam. You can tell the people it's a

temporary emergency due to the storm. You can tell them anything you like. But for God's sake, let's narrow down the field of action a bit!"

"I don't know if I can reach Shep right away," Couver protested. "There was some sort of rock slide over by the east entrance, and he's out with the crew trying to clear the road for the morning rush."

"So get in your car and go looking for him," I insisted, adding, "While you're at it, put your wife and kids in the car and don't go back there to your house until I sound the all clear. Have the other City Council members do the same."

"Come on, Ross. I can't take the kids out on a night like this. They'll catch their deaths of cold!"

"Liable to be getting deaths of burns if you stay there," I snapped. "Remember what happened to the last city manager who defied the power and the glory?"

"Jesus! The computer's acting up again?"

"Just start moving. Call me when you've got your family in a safe place. Oh, one thing more. Don't tell me where that safe place is. This phone's probably tapped."

Before Couver could argue, I slammed the phone down in its cradle and asked the nearby wall, "How does that grab you, Brad?"

Almost as if he'd answered, there was another flash of lightning outside, and a sultry female voice called from the darkness of the corridor, "Oh, God, lover! I love it when you pound me like that. Don't stop! For God's sake, don't stop! I think I'm coming!"

Linda shot me a confused look, and I said, "Gordon's sweetheart. That last discharge must have jarred her awake."

"I thought you said Sam had her removed."

"Just the robot body. Her circuits weren't worth tracing, and she's still down there somewhere on tape."

"God, it *is* like a ghost story!" Linda shuddered. "Gordon's dead, and his sick love toy's been carted away. Yet they're still making love years later in some forgotten printed circuit!"

"Yeah, I want you to stay here by Sam's phone, doll. If

it starts getting warm in here, throw that swivel chair through the window and dive out after it. Don't try for the usual exits."

"Where will you be?"

"Here and there. Give a yell if Sam has anything to say. I'll be able to hear you almost anywhere in the building if you scream loud enough!"

"You're not going down in that maze alone!"

"For openers," I said, kissing her lightly on the cheek as I added, "it's not heroics, kitten. I'm a trained electrician, and two people are twice as easy to zap with a loose wire as one. I'll have enough to worry about down there just watching out for yours truly."

Not waiting for an argument, I ducked out into the corridor, went to the opening I'd cut in the floor, and yanked away the plywood and tarp Sam Couver had ordered placed over the hole.

I'd left my tools in the mirrored room below. Not having a flash light, I had to trust myself to the darkness for a moment. I dropped to the plush carpeting, groped for my tool chest, and flicked on my Zippo. The chest was over against the mirrored wall. I wondered who'd moved it.

Then I noticed the insulated wire snaked in through the sliding doorway. It wasn't completely insulated. The bare copper of the frayed-open end was wrapped coyly around the metal handle of the steel chest.

Kicking off my wet loafers, I peeled my soggy stretch socks from my feet and wiped them on the dry carpeting. Then I leaned gingerly over and touched the wire far below the broken insulation. My finger was still there. I got a better grip and yanked it loose from my tool chest.

It pulled a six-inch arc of high voltage. Very high voltage.

Somewhere a type head started writing something down.

The Zippo was almost too hot to hold by this time. I opened the tool case, took out the flashlight, and switched it on. Putting the lighter away, I picked up my tools and eased through the sliding panel into the darkness beyond the mirrored walls. A quick sweep of the immediate area

revealed nothing but electronic components. Some of them seemed to be chatting about something. But none of them were headed my way.

I paused at the abandoned desk of Gregory Gordon and beamed the light across the IBM Selectric. The type head had written a recent message on the paper roll. It said, "I EXPECTED YOU TO MAKE THAT MOVE."

I picked up a pencil from the desk and, using the rubber-tipped eraser end, hunt-pecked, "WHY DON'T YOU GO SOAK YOUR HEAD? THIS IS A RECORDING."

Then I took an insulated screwdriver and laid the side of the blade against the edge of the metal desk. I touched the tip to the stamped metal typewriter case and, yeah, drew a nice fat arc of high voltage.

The typewriter chattered to life and, untouched by visible human hands, wrote, "NOW THAT WAS PRETTY SMART, SON!"

I knew he wanted me to waste time tracing the circuit. So, ignoring the lethal typewriter, I moved on toward the output units at the far end of the hidden area. I knew there was little chance I'd find anything on such short notice. But some of the effects had to be coming through the output section, and I could safely ignore the inputs . . . or could I?

I found a 360 M 75 memory storage unit and unscrewed the rear panel as, somewhere outside, another lightning bolt shook the earth.

A hidden speaker whimpered in pain and said, "Oh, it hurts when you do that! But don't stop, darling! You know I am your love slave! You know I can't refuse your every desire! But, please, be gentle with me, dear."

Ignoring the electronic ghost, I removed the panel of the 360 M 75, and guess what? The circuitry inside was from a Sperry Rand servoconsole!

Each of the master rotors in there controlled a slaveservo somewhere at the end of the eight or ten dozen servo lines running out to either side under the mess of other equipment. I didn't have a clue as to what they could be connected to. But anytime one of the master rotors at this end turned, a slave rotor at the other end of the line did

the same thing. That was something. But it wasn't enough. I had no idea where the master controls of this weird hybrid were. The switches on the 360 M 75 casing were dummies.

I heard a female voice and, for a moment, thought Gordon's robot mistress was getting hot for my body again. Then I realized it was Linda, and I moved swiftly back to the mirrored room.

I shouted up to her, and she told me Shep Conway had just called in. He couldn't turn off the generating turbines.

"The doors of the power plant won't open," Linda explained.

"Tell Shep to bust them in!" I yelled.

Linda yelled down, "I already did. He says they're solid bronze and that one of his men got a terrible shock when he tried to use a crow bar!"

I started to suggest something more drastic. Then I reflected that it wasn't worth the risk to Shep's crew, since Spinner probably had that eventuality figured in any case. I told Linda to tell the maintenance man to try draining the reservoir and went back to the computer maze.

As I passed the desk, I saw the type head had written, "WOULD YOU LIKE TO CALL IT A DRAW?"

I picked up the pencil again and hunt-pecked, "WHAT ARE YOUR TERMS?"

"GO AWAY," the typewriter replied. "NONE OF THIS IS ANY OF YOUR BUSINESS ANYWAY. GO AWAY AND WE CALL IT A DRAW. STAY AND YOU WILL BE IN CHECK WITHIN FIVE."

"BISHOP HAS YOUR BLACK KNIGHT *EN PRISE*," I replied.

There was no answer.

How could there be?

I didn't know what I was threatening him with, either. But with any luck he'd check over before he threw another whammy!

There was a rumble of thunder, and the voice of electromagnetic love sighed, "God, you're so big! I've never known a man with such a huge . . . What's keeping you . . . Hi, lover, I've been waiting for you . . . Oh, no! Not in

my popo! You're killing me! Hi, lover, I've been waiting for you."

I considered her garbled words as I remembered that they suggested balling her tapes every time there was a flash of lightning. I fished an induction meter from my kit and clamped it on what I hoped was a power line running to one of the servo banks. It was pulling a steady hundred and ten volts. What it wanted with the juice was anybody's guess.

There was a hissing sound from what seemed to be an ITT electromonitoring subsystem I say *seemed* because the refrigerator-sized casing was mounted oddly on a stand of expanded metal gridwork and had what looked like an iron bowling ball growing out of its head. Its indicator lights were flashing at random intervals. But I couldn't read them out until I checked the line I'd clamped onto.

The current remained steady as I waited for the rumble of thunder in the valley. But, meanwhile, that hybrid twonky staring down at me kept hissing louder and louder.

I'd heard the sound before. But just where or when escaped me. There was a smell of ozone in the air, and then I could literally feel the rumble as, somewhere close, lightning crashed to the rain-soaked earth from the tormented sky. There was even more ozone in the air around me now, and every hair on my body was standing up and tingling with a static charge.

But the needle on my induction meter never quivered. The electrical storm outside had no apparent effect on this particular power line.

Okay. Then why was my flashlight glowing? I mean, the metal tube itself. Not the bulb.

I switched it off, but the eerie green glow of the corona discharge outlined the rim in the darkness. I could see my own hand, gripping the light, with every hair standing straight out from the skin and glowing with a firefly light of its own!

I caught a flicker of motion in the corner of my eye, and the ghostly voice of Gordon's taped love affair murmured, "Oh, that was lovely, darling. Can't we do it again?"

Then I swallowed a scream as a soft blur of ectoplastic light fluttered toward me from the opening of the mirrored love nest!

As it came nearer, I saw it was a moth. A moth escaping from the rain or perhaps the carpeting—left behind when Couver had the sick love toy removed. I'm not much on natural history, but whatever kind of moth it was, it glowed in the dark! Its fluttering wings trailed a flickering corona discharge as it spiraled in frantic circles, its tiny nervous system shorted by the incredible amount of static electricity in the air!

Incredible wasn't the word for it. The night air was damp, and I was in a well-grounded metal maze. So where in hell was all this Saint Elmo's fire coming from?

The illuminated moth circled my head and, deciding I wasn't a candle after all, fluttered over to a nearby metal casing.

There was a blinding flash. I was knocked to the deck plates and sort of lost interest in just what had happened to the insect as I lay there, trying to breathe. It wasn't easy. I'd taken some of the charge, and my diaphragm felt like I'd been kicked in the solar plexus. I guess I had been kicked—by a few million volts of thankfully low amperage. The hissing I'd heard had to be a king-sized Van De Graaf generator hidden inside something else. That's why the noise hadn't rung a bell right off. Ordinarily that one's used to demonstrate static electricity in schools; it sits comfortably on the instructor's table and only throws enough man-made lightning to scare hell out of you!

I muttered, "Okay, Dr. Frankenstein. I was just leaving!"

Then I started crawling along the floor, keeping my head and the rest of me as low as possible. Behind me the manufactured lightning leaped from the ball atop the dummy ITT unit in a random searching pattern as, somewhere, somehow, Bradshaw Spinner changed the polarity of surrounding metal objects. My shadow crawled ahead of me, outlined in chalky blue flashes as the baby lightning bolts lashed the air for my standing or running body. If the playful electronic messiah had thought about the deck be-

fore I'd crawled to safety, I'd have been in big trouble. But apparently he was throwing his bolts blindly and assumed that if I was on the deck, he'd gotten me.

I hauled myself out of the hole in the floor to find Town Hall a bit crowded. Marvin Greenspan, Couver, and a couple of the other members of the City Council were there. So was Shep Conway, the maintenance chief. The first thing he said was, "MacLean, we can't black out the town."

"Linda told me about the power house locking itself in for the night," I said. "What about the floodgates?"

"Can't get near them!" Conway said. "There's a corona discharge on the manual controls that you won't believe!"

"I believe," I sighed. "The guy think's he's God or maybe Tesla."

"Who's Tesla?" asked Marvin Greenspan.

I let Shep Conway fill him in as I went to check on Linda. Behind me I heard Conway saying, "Tesla was this nut who worked for Edison back before the First World War. He had this idea he could broadcast power through the air and, before he got through, damned near electrocuted the state of Colorado. Built this big static generator up in the Rocky Mountains and shot juice into the air until they made him stop. Before he was through, light bulbs were glowing forty miles away, and every woman in Denver had her hair pins magnetized!"

I thought about Tesla's turn-of-the-century experiments as I looked in on Linda. She was on the phone and waved reassuringly at me as she told someone at the other end of the line a lie about everything being under control. It was nice to see she was loyal to the Cybernia Corporation. Also, a mass exodus at this point could lead to more trouble than it would avoid.

I looked over her shoulder out the rain-splattered window and knew what the calls were about. Every light in Cybernia was flashing off and on. Between flashes you could see the ghostly glow of Saint Elmo's fire outlining the trees and houses in glow-worm tracery of green!

There was a flash of natural lightning, and the public address system boomed out across the valley, "OH, MY

GOD, DARLING! YOU CAN'T MEAN YOU WANT TO FUCK ME AGAIN!"

There was a machinegun chatter from a nearby desk, and Linda and I stared wordlessly at one another. Then she said, "It's one of the Addressograph machines. The lightning must have made it start up by itself."

I walked over to the desk and gingerly picked up the card the addressograph had spit out. It was a bill form that should have told me how much I owed the Cybernia Corporation for my monthly electrical needs. Instead, it read, "ALL RIGHT, ROSS. TELL ME HOW YOU DO THAT AND I PROMISE SAFE CONDUCT FOR YOU AND THE GIRL!"

I picked up a pencil and, using the rubber tip, pecked the input keyboard. I wrote, "MATE IN TWO. SUGGEST YOU PLEAD INSANITY."

Linda was watching over my shoulder and asked what I meant. I said, "I'm not sure. But every time the lightning flashes, the whole system goes crazy. I mean, on its own. Bradshaw thinks I'm doing it. Apparently he hasn't made the connection between the natural lightning discharges and the way his thinkertinker's acting up."

"Where are you going?" Linda asked as I suddenly snapped my fingers and headed for the door. I said, "Going to play a hunch about that lightning!"

I found a cop in the corridor and, since he wasn't doing anything constructive at the moment, ordered him to follow me.

He shrugged and asked why we were going in the ladies' room. I told him it was the nearest john, and he muttered, "You must have to go pretty bad."

I said, "I need a mirror."

"I guess you do at that," said the cop as I started unscrewing a large panel mirror over one of the sinks. I said, "Follow me, I'm going to need you to hand this up to me, topside."

Then I went up the stairwell, all the way to the trapdoor leading to the cupola.

I placed the mirror against the wall and had the cop boost me up. Then, lying on the rain-soaked flooring of

the open cupola, I reached down as he man-handled the heavy slab of silvered glass up to me. I cut my hand on a chipper corner. But it was nothing, and down below me other people were having troubles of their own.

The lights were still blinking on and off in a random pattern, and up the hill houses were burning. I counted five or six and realized I'd been right to have Sam Couver and the other members of the City Council evacuate their families. As I wrestled the heavy glass slab across the wet flooring, I wondered how many people Bradshaw Spinner thought he could get away with chalking up to computer error. I guess I still wonder sometimes.

Given senility, paranoia, and complete control of an entire valley's power system, there's no telling how far he'd have gone, if I hadn't remembered about those photocells Linda thought were watching us and connected them with the lightning flashes before the old man did! They were watching, all right. Watching Spinner's house on the ridge above us!

A police siren wailed in the distance, and the public address system blared out across the valley, "ATTENTION, ATTENTION, ATTENTION! I LOVE IT WHEN YOU LET ME SUCK IT FIRST!"

Then I had the mirror in place between the louvers and the photocell bank.

Nothing happened. Nothing I could see at any rate.

"OH, NOT AGAIN! HOW CAN YOU KEEP IT UP LIKE THAT?" boomed the PA system, echoing lust back and forth between the ridges as I wondered idly what five hundred mothers were going to tell their kids the funny lady in the sky was talking about.

The cop called up to me, and I asked what was up. He said, "I wanted to ask you that! What the hell have you done up there? The fucking PA system's talking dirty!"

I lowered myself to the floor below and said, "I'm not sure. But I hope I've taken care of the trouble."

"Yeah? Well make that damn PA system shut up then. There's *wimmen* out there, mister!"

"Let's get downstairs," I said. "I want to make a few phone calls."

When we reached Sam Couver's office, Linda told me she'd phoned the police and checked on the situation. Nobody was particularly dead yet. One of Conway's men had called to say the power plant's doors had unstuck. The maintenance man wanted to know what he was supposed to do now. I told him to forget about shutting down the power grid.

Then I called the police again and told them to get an ambulance and fire crew up to Bradshaw Spinner's place on the double. As soon as I hung up, I dialed Spinner's number.

There was no answer.

"What did you do, Ross?" Linda asked.

I said, "You remember those electric eyes of yours? I think that was how he communicated his commands from up there on the ridge. He has some sort of laser bank rigged up to an input keyboard. With a hundred photocells to activate via needle beams of nearly invisible laser light, he had literally millions of possible numerical sequences to choose from and any number of switches to activate. Safe up there, with no obvious connection to the town except his perfectly harmless phone line, Bradshaw Spinner has been controlling the whole system ever since he murdered Gordon. Before that I suppose they shared the fun."

The cop had been following the conversation up to a point. He said, "You think Mr. Spinner had something to do with the crazy way the PA system's been acting? I always knew there was something funny about that old geezer. But dammit, there are *wimmen* out there, and he shouldn't have made the PA talk dirty like that!" He suddenly frowned and asked, "What was that about a murder just now?"

"You'd better get back to your post," I suggested. "I'll explain it all to your superiors as soon as we've got things under control."

He went away, muttering to himself about fucking machinery talking dirty. After that, we waited. It couldn't have been long. It only *seemed* like a million years.

Then the phone rang.

I picked it up and said, "MacLean here."

"Ross?" husked a barely audible voice at the other end of the line. I glanced at Linda and nodded to her unspoken question. Then Bradshaw Spinner moaned quietly and said, "I think you've burned out my retinas, son."

"Sorry about that," I replied gently. "You *did* check the cell bank with your telescope?"

"Binoculars," sighed the old man. "I seem to have blinded myself in the process. Didn't anyone ever tell you what could happen to a man who stared directly into a laser beam with high-powered binoculars, son?"

"No, but I get the picture. I've sent an ambulance, sir. It should be there any minute."

"Screw the ambulance. They're not having the satisfaction of putting *me* away! You'll never prove it, MacLean. Oh, you're pretty smart. I'll have to admit that. But you'll never be able to prove a thing when I'm done. Only, just for the hell of it, will you tell me one thing?"

"Look, you'll never stand trial, sir. Just take it easy and let them try and they may save your eyes yet."

"Damn you! How did you do it!"

"Mirror," I explained. "I saw the system's master controls were being whammied by lightning and figured the controls had something to do with *light*. Then I remembered the photo electric bank aimed up the slope toward your place and figured that was the only way you could be doing it. I also knew a mirror would beam your laser signals back on you. I'm truly sorry you were so confused you stared at the cupola with high-powered glasses before you'd had time to think it through."

"So am I," sighed Bradshaw Spinner. He was silent for a time. "You said it would be mate in two, Ross. I must say it was one hell of a game while it lasted."

"Why not concede?" I asked quietly.

Spinner chuckled wryly and said, "I'm a poor loser. And I've got one move left. I'm going to castle, son. You see, my *reputation* can still move out of check."

Then he hung up.

The explosion, when it came, was tremendous. It broke windows all over the valley and the police arrived to find debris scattered a quarter mile in every direction.

Nothing was left of Bradshaw Spinner's home or Bradshaw Spinner but a gaping hole in the ground.

I suppose you read about it in the obituaries. For political as well as sentimental reasons, the coroner's jury found it "Accidental death due to computer error."

John Wyndham

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